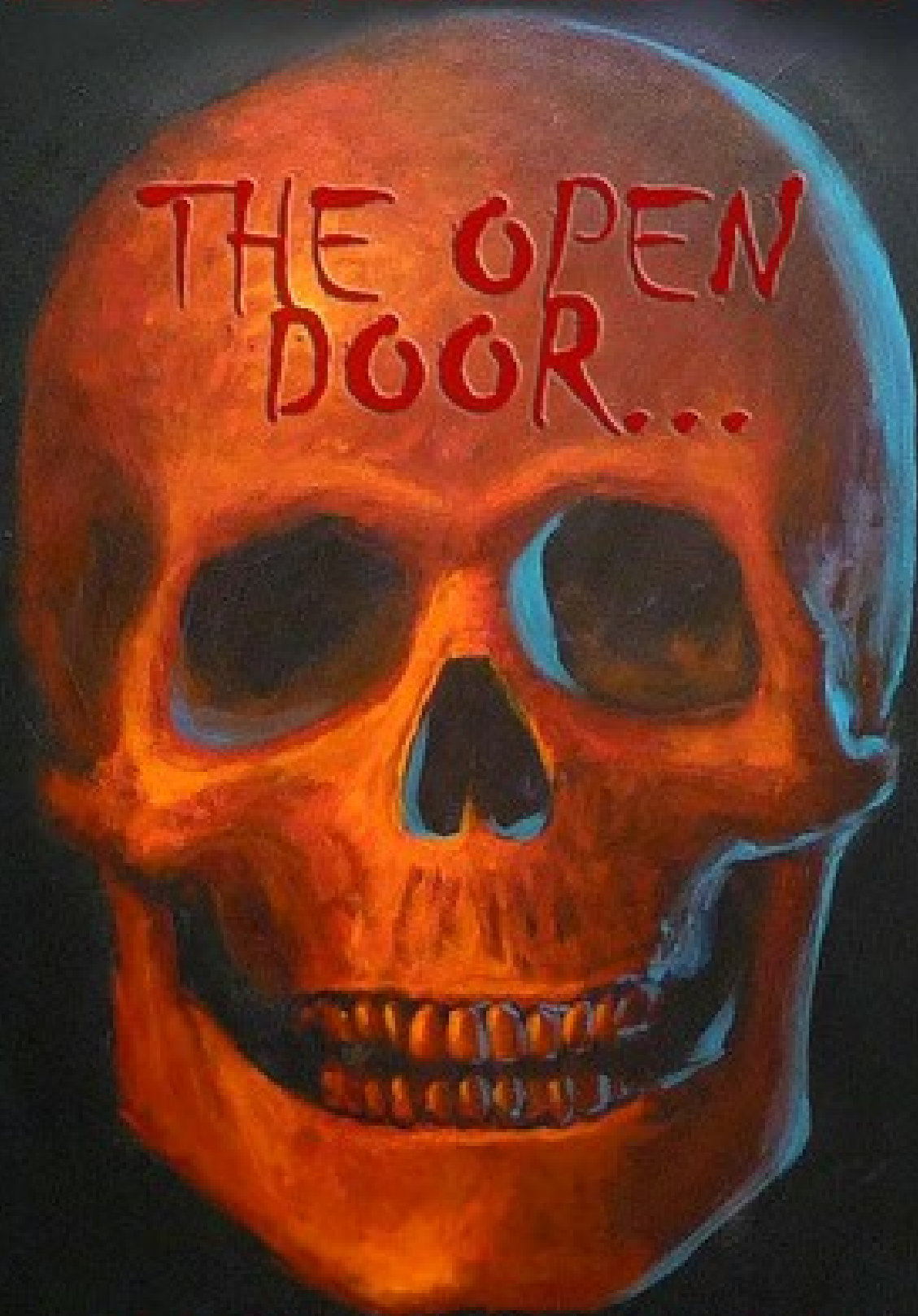


# MIKE MORRISON



...AND OTHER NIGHT TIME  
TALES OF TERROR

**The Open Door  
... and Other  
Night Time  
Tales of  
Terror**

By

**Mike Morrison**

## **The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, either living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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**The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

For  
Alex and Jack,  
always.

And for my Mom and Dad.

## **The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

## The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror

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## Forward

In your hands is the culmination of almost three years of my life.

Granted, during that time I did get married, buy a house, have two kids and worked uninspiring jobs full-time, not to mention was often lured away by television and other good books (maybe that's why there are so many references to pop culture throughout). The narrative as a whole spans 25 years and each tale doesn't necessarily follow chronologically from the one that preceded it. If I in anyway have been incorrect with dates or places, rest assured it was done so under the auspices of artistic license in order to set an atmosphere or for good old-fashioned fun. If it turns out that I simply made a mistake (forgive me if I didn't bother to find the *exact* date when *Rainbow Brite* colorfully burst onto the scene), then I choose to chalk it up to supernatural shenanigans rather than an ignorance of the facts on my part. Artistic license again, you know.

So turn the lights down low and let me be your guide through these interconnected tales of terror. If I've done my job well, it will only be a matter of time before every light in your apartment or house is turned to its fullest. Climb in; I see a door opening in the distance that we must pass through. But please, keep your arms inside the car at all times. You never know what might be lurking out there in the darkness, eagerly waiting to bite them off.

But I do.

Mike Morrison  
February 2007 –  
October 2009



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From a single, damnable act,  
Comes forth an evil seed.  
And from that day on,  
Colors and taints each deed.  
From it roots sprout forth,  
And hungrily do they spread.  
Till they grapple all those living,  
And touch even the souls of the dead.

Excerpt from  
*"The Bone Yard Tree"*  
By Michael Brooks

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## **Prologue: 'Bedtime Stories'**

If he knew he'd be dead, a decapitated corpse, in less than a week, Stan Foster, sitting on the couch, wouldn't be thinking of all the chores that still needed to be done around the house. He wouldn't be spending his time with the movie his family is watching. He would be trying to stop it. And since that can only be accomplished by another, it's best he's at present ignorant of his impending demise.

His wife, Anne, sits in the recliner in the far corner of the room, her features cringing at almost every other scene. She has already suggested shutting the movie off a number of times, but Alice, their 7-year old daughter, promises her she can handle it. Alice, a large grin on her face, sits on the floor, her back resting against the recliners matching ottoman, with a large bowl of buttered popcorn on her lap. They had decided to have a family fun night, and seeing as how there was very little family fare left on primetime, opted to watch a DVD instead of regular television.

Alice chose *Gremlins*, one of Stan's favorite movies that Anne knew little about. She was weary upon hearing Alice's decision, but the young girl wasn't to be dissuaded. And she was smart about it, too. She sold her mother on the movie by showing her Steven Spielberg's name on the show box. Seeing that the man behind *E.T.* was involved alleviated most of her concerns. By the time the little creatures start their rampage, however, Anne looks as if she is about to lose her shit. She keeps looking to Stan, silently inquiring of him why he hadn't spoken up and warned her of the films more frightening content. He just shrugs his shoulders and smiles. Anne is a great wife and mother, but sometimes she worries a little too much. As far as he's concerned, it's his job to help keep the Foster universe well balanced.

And to take care of the work that needs to be done around the house, as well. Thinking again of that

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mental list of chores pulls his attention away from the movie and the wife concerned over their daughter watching it. He's sure he will get an earful about it later anyways.

They have been living in the new house on Hawthorn Street for a little over a month now. They had moved into town from Portland at the beginning of September and there was still a lot of work to be done. Much more than the real estate agent had let on. Aside from the standard unpacking, organizing, storing and cleaning, there are odds and ends that need minor or extensive repairs from the top floor to the bottom. The mantle above the fireplace is coming loose. The chimney needs sweeping. A number of cabinet drawers in the kitchen stick. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom is starting to come off its hinges. A bedroom doorknob has fallen off. The storm windows in the basement need resealing. It seems as if the list just goes on and on.

Thinking of the basement makes Stan think of the mold down there as well. It looks as if the previous owners had gotten rid of most of it, but a small patch still clings to the corner wall of the room that houses their washer and dryer. It's the task he's looking forward to dealing with the least (he hates spiders and there are more cobwebs down there than mold), so he decides it will be the first to get done. At least everything else will seem easier afterwards. He had been thinking of starting it earlier this evening, but didn't want to skip out on their family time together. And truth be told, he is having far too much fun watching Anne's reactions to the movie to get up and start now. It's Friday night and he still has all weekend to get his hands dirty.

The movie comes to an end and it's time to get Alice into bed. It's Stan's turn and he lifts his daughter in his arms to take her upstairs. She leans over and gives her mother a kiss goodnight first.

"You'd better not have any nightmares!" Anne says, admonishingly. "That movie was your idea, you know."

"I know. I won't. Goodnight, mummy."

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Stan carries Alice into her room and sets her on the bed. She had gotten into her pajamas before they started the movie and now only has to slip under the covers. Stan takes the chair from the corner of the room, left there for either his or Anne's use as they read their daughter a bedtime story. He notices the fat pumpkin on the table next to the chair and smiles. Alice had gotten it last week at the grocery store in preparation for Halloween and with the intention of carving it into a spooky Jack-O-Lantern. Stan smiles because he knows all too well that, when the time comes, she will have grown so attached to it she won't be able to bring herself to carve it and there it will sit until Christmas. Then, with the distraction of new toys from Santa, Anne will be able to secret it away in the middle of the night for the following morning's garbage pick-up. As always, Alice won't notice it's gone.

"Okay, honey," Stan says, trying to get comfortable on the uncomfortable folding metal chair. "Do you want me to read to you from your Disney Princess Fairy Tales collection?"

"No!" Alice says, smiling a cherubic, yet mischievous, grin. "That's what *mom* reads to me. I want you to read something else."

"Okay, what have you got?"

Alice reaches over to her bookshelf and starts moving aside the many children's books there, searching for something hidden behind them. It reminds Stan of how he used to hide his comic books from his parents under the mattress of his bed. Like the pumpkin, this makes him smile as well.

"Here you are." Alice says, retrieving a worn paperback from behind the *Dr. Seuss* and *Sesame Street* hard covers. She excitedly hands it to her father.

The book is a collection of Michael Brooks' short horror fiction entitled *Night Time Tales of Terror*. The small piece of paper laminated to the spine and featuring a filing system based on the dewey decimal model lets him know it is from the local library. Alice had apparently been able to sign it out by herself regardless of its horrific, mature

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content. Anne would have a hemorrhage if she ever found out, so Stan decides he will keep that fact to himself.

“I don’t know, honey.” He says, leafing through the pages and seeing some of the titles and reading some of the prose. “Are you sure? Some of this stuff looks pretty scary.”

“I can handle it.” Alice says, moving into a more comfortable position on the bed, already knowing her father won’t veto her literary selection.

“Okay, then. Where do you want me to start?”

“Why at the beginning, of course.”

# The Wretched Ones



## **The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

*For Richard Matheson*

12-year old Lindsey hears the scratching and giggling coming from behind the walls as she sits in her living room one November night. Three days ago, her older brother Mitchell was admitted to the hospital and seven days ago the family pet, an overweight tabby named Mr. Bojangles, suddenly disappeared. Her father isn't home yet and she is alone. The snow is falling heavily outside and the view from the living room window makes her feel colder than she actually is. But it's the sounds emanating from the dark recesses hiding behind layers of wood and drywall that causes an involuntary shiver to quickly ascend her spine. Sitting on the faded beige sofa next to the ficus plant that Mr. Bojangles steadfastly refused to stop nibbling at, she raises her knees to her chest. Feeling the soft cotton of her pink pajamas against her forearms comforts her somewhat. She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and repeatedly reminds herself that there's nothing to be afraid of. *There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nothing to be afraid of.*

Then more scratching. More giggling. Louder this time. More insistent. It is coming from the many small, sharp fingernails and hungry throats of the Wretched Ones - troll-like monsters that have lived within the walls of the family's two-story, slightly rundown townhouse since God knows when. At night, lying alone in her small bed in her darkened room, when rational thoughts are so much harder to cling to, Lindsey knows the Wretched Ones really do exist. They scurry behind the walls like vermin. They sneak out of unseen holes and cracks along the floorboards in the basement and the attic. They root through the garbage and watch the family sleep defenselessly. They swarm, trap and devour the family pet. During the day she can see how foolish she's being. She understands that the Wretched Ones are nothing more than figments of her overactive imagination brought about by the teasing of an older, dying brother. During the day she can laugh at herself. But at night... alone...

Like tonight.

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*Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!* She wants to scream to the empty room, the empty house, to the things moving about behind the walls with Mr. Bojangles' blood and fur still smeared to twisted lips and caught between glistening fangs. *Shut up!*

But she doesn't. She breathes in and out, continuing to remind herself that there's nothing to be afraid of. As if on cue, the scratching and the giggling stops and she cautiously opens her eyes. They quickly adjust to the dim light cast by the solitary lamp in the corner of the room and reveal nothing out of the ordinary. No small monsters scattering about the way cockroaches will scatter for darkness when someone flicks a light switch. Soon the sound of her thumping heart quiets and all she can hear is the ticking of the clock mounted on the wall next to the door. Slowly, almost reluctantly, she lets go of her knees and stretches her legs over the side of the sofa, stealing herself to quickly pull them up the moment she feels even the slightest flutter against the back of her ankles.

Her feet come to a rest on the chilly hardwood floor unscathed. She wants to let out a victory cheer, but doesn't dare disturb the silence, even with the sound of her own exuberance. Instead, she gives herself a mental pat on the back for doing just as her father had instructed her to do the next time her imagination ran away from her.

"You know there's really nothing to be afraid of, don't you, sweetheart?" He had sympathetically asked her late one night a little over a month ago when she ran into his room, crying and hysterical.

"But Mitchell knows about them." Lindsey said, hardly stopping to take a breath. "He says he's seen them and that they're called the Wretched Ones. He says they're little monsters with sharp teeth and claws and they hunt in a pack. He says they're gonna come and get me in the night when I'm alone because I'm the weakest one and they always start with the weakest one when they're all alone."

Her father had smiled then. Without irritation. Without malice. In fact, it was one of the few genuine

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smiles to sneak onto his features since Mitchell was diagnosed with leukemia. Since before even then. Since the time he caught his wife screwing the mailman on their marital bed. If the cliché hadn't happened to him, but to some other poor schmuck, he would've laughed his ass off. But it happened to him and he hasn't laughed since. He's barely even smiled, for that matter. But he smiled that night as he picked up his trembling daughter and placed her lovingly on his knee.

"And why do you think Mitchell said those things to you?"

"Because he's a big fat meanie." Lindsey responded, pouting.

"No, that's not why. It's because your older brother is sick and he can't go out anymore to play with his friends. He can't go out and do all of the things he loves to do. He's really sick and he's really scared. And sometimes, like now, when people are scared they try to scare other people too so they won't have to feel like they're all alone. Do you understand that?"

"Sort of." Lindsey said reluctantly. "But I swear I can hear them. The Wretched Ones. I hear them in the walls at night."

"That's just your overactive imagination, Lindsey. Mitchell says these things to you and then you get scared and then your mind plays tricks on you. And when it's probably nothing more than Mr. Bojangles walking around the house, your brain makes you believe it's really a bunch of small monsters capering about."

"I guess so."

"I know so." Lindsey's father said, lifting his daughter from his knee. "And do you want to know what else I know?"

"What?"

"I know a trick you can use the next time you get really scared and think the Wretched Ones are coming to get you."

"What is it?" Lindsey asked excitedly, her previous fears almost forgotten. "What can I do to make them go away?"

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“Well,” her father said, pausing for effect. “You can’t really make them go away because they aren’t really there in the first place. But, the next time you *think* they’re there, you just close your eyes, take a deep breath and keep telling yourself there’s nothing to be afraid of. And guess what?”

“What?”

“You won’t be afraid anymore.”

“That’s all there is to it?” Lindsey asked incredulously.

“That’s it, that’s all.” Her father said, walking her back to her room.

“Thanks, Dad.” Lindsey said, kissing him on the cheek as he kneeled down to her level. “Are you gonna punish Mitchell for telling me those stories?”

“Of course.” Her father answered. It was a lie, but only a little white one.

Within a couple of weeks, his son was too sick to bother punishing for such a juvenile prank. His condition worsened and he was admitted to the hospital where none of the doctors expected him to leave except for in a box. Tales of the Wretched Ones were the furthest thing from Lindsey’s father’s grief-stricken mind. But on that night, outside of her bedroom, he had promised.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. Just remember what I told you to do. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and...”

“Tell myself there’s nothing to be afraid of.” Lindsey said, proudly finishing his sentence.

“That’s my girl. You remember that and everything will be fine.”

“I will.”

And this November night she does. Following her father’s advice, she gathers up her courage and leaves the dimly lit living room to make her way towards the well-lit kitchen. She tells herself it’s to get a glass of milk, not to reach the safety of the light. In the back of her mind, however, she knows the truth. The Wretched Ones are

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real, and when she's alone like this, they're just waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Prancing across the cold linoleum floor, Lindsey reaches the fridge and opens the door, pulling out the half-empty carton of milk. She crosses to the counter and retrieves a glass. Pouring carefully, she listens to the sounds of the house, trying to fool herself into believing she's only expecting to hear the sound of her father's broken down Oldsmobile pulling into the snow covered driveway and not the other sound. Not the scratching. The giggling. The Wretch....

*Stupid kid*, she thinks to herself, interrupting her own train of thought. *Drink your milk, go back into the living room and wait patiently for Dad. Maybe read a book. Watch a video. Just stop thinking like a damn kid.* Thoughts of her father cause her to glance at the digital clock on the microwave and for a moment worries of the Wretched Ones and their plans for her vanish.

7:22 p.m.

*Where the heck is he?* She thinks, absentmindedly taking a sip of the milk. It tastes sour. *He should've been here over an hour ago.*

Since their mother had left and the money situation worsened, her father had started working overtime at the plant on a regular basis and for a while it worked. With both Mitchell and Lindsey getting home from school at the same time, the older boy could watch Lindsey and alleviate the need to pay for a sitter. Mitchell, although he pretended otherwise, secretly enjoyed the responsibility of looking after his baby sister. He didn't have much to do, actually. Make them both a light snack, usually a grilled cheese sandwich, and then argue over whose videos they were going to watch. An argument he almost always won.

Once Mitchell got sick, however, all her father could do to go back to working his regular nine-to-five shift. His boss (a crusty old prick, she overheard her dad say once, which made her laugh so hard she thought she would never stop) had grown accustomed to the extra hours and didn't mind paying the overtime as long as the

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production line kept on schedule and was pissed. When Mitchell was admitted to the hospital, her father informed him he could no longer do the overtime because he needed to be with his son, regardless of how much the extra money helped deal with the mounting medical bills. For the past three days, he would go straight to the hospital after work before coming home at 6. He hated leaving his daughter alone, but there was no one he could turn to for help. Since she was going to be alone until 5 o'clock anyways, he figured another hour couldn't hurt.

*So where is he now?* Lindsey thinks, growing more upset. For a split second, the idea that something happened to Mitchell crosses her mind and she feels a wave of guilt for having called him a big fat meanie (and every other mean thing she ever called him either to his face or behind his back over the course of her brief lifetime). The notion quickly passes, however, when she realizes that if something had happened her father would have come home and picked her up right away. He wouldn't have left her here all alone to worry about what might be happening to either or both of them.

Pouring the rest of the rancid milk down the sink, she goes to the kitchen table and picks up the telephone, wondering if perhaps there's a message on the voicemail she might have overlooked. Instead of the persistent beeping that would indicate she had missed a call or the steady drone of the dial tone, she hears nothing at all.

Scowling, Lindsey wonders if the phone company has once again disconnected their line. It happened before when they had fallen behind in their payments. Or maybe the storm has caused an outage. A line could have collapsed under the weight of the heavy snow. Realizing that these are the most plausible options, Lindsey has no idea what drives her to check the cord running from the phone into the small jack at the base of the wall. Confusion, perhaps. She knows the phone was working when she got home from school because a telemarketer had called asking for 'the man of the house', trying to get him to sign up for a new credit card. Lindsey tells herself it must be some form of intuition. A gut feeling. A hunch.

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She doesn't allow herself to entertain the notion that it's paranoia.

Kneeling down, she traces the cord with her fingers until she comes to a frayed end. Her bewilderment temporarily postpones her fear as she looks at the small, gray cord in her hand. Before she can come up with any kind of explanation, a sudden crash in the living room jolts her to her feet. Just like that, the fear returns, more intense than before.

She isn't alone in the house.

Her heart racing, Lindsey wants to run out of the kitchen, down the hallway and out the front door. She won't even stop to put on her winter coat or boots regardless of the stormy weather just outside the house. As far as she is concerned, it's safer outside than in. The Wretched Ones aren't out there. They're in here. In the house with her.

If a chair wasn't partially blocking her path to the hallway right then, she would have done just that. Ran without looking back. But the obstruction affords her just enough time to hear the voice in her head that keeps panic at bay a little while longer. It is not her father's voice she hears this time, but her own.

"That's a big load of pooh." She had said a week ago, struggling with the conviction to believe her own words. "You're full of pooh, Mitchell."

Mitchell, sitting on the end of her bed and looking sicklier by the day, laughed. The light from the lamp on the small bedside table created near bottomless shadows out of his features. The sunken cheeks and shallow eyes made him look more like a ghoul than a boy. Truth be told, at that moment Lindsey was more afraid of her older brother than his tales of the Wretched Ones.

"It's true, little Lindsey. Dad was working the nightshift at the plant and they came and stole her away. You and I were sound asleep and didn't hear a thing. We didn't hear the scratching and giggling as they emerged from their secret holes and cracks in the walls. We didn't see them sneak into her room, knock her unconscious and drag her away."

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“You’re a doofus, Mitchell. Dad didn’t start the nightshift until after Mom left. Besides, they’re really small. Where would they have dragged her too?”

Mitchell noticed Lindsey had said the Wretched Ones ‘were’ really small, not ‘they are supposed to be’ really small. Maybe she was getting too old to scare with these kinds of silly stories, but as long as there was a chance he could still get her worked up nice and good he was going to do it. *Hell*, he thought, *that’s what older brother’s are supposed to do. It’s like an unwritten law or something.*

“You see, what they did was they knocked her unconscious so that we wouldn’t hear her screaming as they cut her up. They started with her fingers and toes. Then her hands and feet. Arms and legs. They worked and worked, cutting and sawing away, until all that was left was her big fat head.”

“Yuck, Mitchell, you’re disgusting!” Lindsey said, sticking her tongue out to highlight her point. “Besides, you said the Wretched Ones always go for the weakest ones. Why didn’t they go for Mr. Bojangles first?”

“Maybe he’s too fast for them and he got away.”

“Mr. Bojangles is too fat to get away. It’s from eating the plant in the living room all the time.”

“The cat is fat because you keep feeding him treats when you think nobody’s looking.”

“Well, he likes them.” Lindsey said, matter-of-factly. “Anyways, if the Wretched Ones did what you say they did there would have been blood all over the place. Dad would have saw it and called the cops. See? I was right all along. You’re full of pooh *and* a doofus.”

He was losing her. Maybe she had outgrown all of that monsters-behind-the-walls fairytale crap. *Well*, Mitchell thought, *I’m not giving up that easily. If she wants to play hardball, I guess it’s time I take a more grown-up approach.*

“Where do you think Mom is then?”

“I don’t know.” Lindsey said.

“What did Dad tell you? Where does he say she is?”



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“He says she’s visiting with her family. That they’re spending some time apart to sort out some problems.”

“Does that sound right to you? What kind of problems? I’ve never seen Mom and Dad fight before, have you?”

“No.” Lindsey said, the sound of doubt creeping into the timbre of her voice. “I never have.”

“That’s my point.” Mitchell said. “Do you want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“I think Dad killed her.”

“Mitchell! That’s a horrible thing to say!”

“It explains everything, though. Can’t you see that?”

“You are gonna be in so much trouble! I’m telling Dad what you said and you are gonna be in more trouble then you’ve ever been in your whole entire life!”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Mitchell said, growing worried.

“Yes, I would.” Lindsey said, defiantly. “You just wait and see.”

But Lindsey never did tell her father what her older brother had said. She wanted to, but by the next afternoon Mitchell had slipped into a coma and was admitted to the hospital. She still felt like telling on him, but realized the time wasn’t right. For starters, Mitchell wasn’t even awake to suffer his punishment. And as time went by, she began to realize the full extent of her brother’s sickness. She felt guilt, not anger, towards him for having originally believed he was faking the coma to avoid getting into trouble.

Tonight, however, her feelings of anger and guilt are replaced by downright terror. Terror that his stories about the Wretched Ones are true after all and that whatever crashed in the living room crashed because of them.

*You’re not going to run*, she tells herself, grabbing a hold of the chair in front of her to both steady her nerves and make sure it stays firmly between her, the hallway and

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the means of a cowardly escape. *With Dad not here and Mitchell in the hospital, I'm in charge. This is my house and I'm not going to be scared out of it. I'm not running away from it for anything.*

She hopes the pep talk will work at quelling the fear rising in her throat, but it doesn't. At best, it allows her to slowly leave the kitchen instead of running out, apprehensively making her way towards the living room. Trembling, her palms starting to sweat and her heart pounding in her chest harder than it's ever pounded before, she stands at the doorway of the dimly lit room and discovers the source of the recent disturbance.

"Mr. Bojangles?" She asks, staring at the remains of the ficus plant on the floor next to the sofa. Shattered pieces of the porcelain pot protrude from a messy pile of dirty brown soil. "Is that you, boy?"

Of course it isn't the missing family pet. Lindsey knows this, but holds out hope. If it isn't the AWOL Mr. Bojangles, she doesn't want to think who or what it might be. But deep in her heart she already knows. She's alone in the house with the Wretched Ones.

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty." She says, kneeling down and snapping her fingers, pretending to look for the cat more for her own fragile piece of mind than for any other practical purpose.

With her eyes focused on the living room, she doesn't see the creature on the staircase banister behind her. It is small, about a foot and a half in length, and very gaunt. Small tufts of coarse black hair smatter its bulbous head. The thing is the color of coffee-stained paper, and baring the torn piece of red cloth that completely covers its eyes, is naked. If Lindsey had turned around and saw it before it reached out six long, bony fingers to flick off the lights in the hallway, she might have been reminded of a member of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* from one of her favorite Saturday morning cartoon shows.

Still kneeling, her arm outstretched in a beckoning gesture for a cat that will never return home, Lindsey gasps as the light behind her is extinguished. With only the minimal light coming from the living room, there are far

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too many concealing shadows. Her heart, which had been beating so furiously just moments before, stops altogether. She becomes as frozen as any old deer in any old set of headlights.

Her heart remembers to pump and her lungs remember to breathe just as the familiar sounds of scratching and giggling return. This time, however, newer ones accompany them. The sounds of small, makeshift knives being unsheathed. Of lips being licked ravenously. Of tiny, growling stomachs. Of sighs and groans of sick anticipation. Worst of all, the sounds are no longer coming from behind the walls, but in the actual room with her. The scratching turns to shuffling and the shuffling to the approach of dozens of miniature footfalls. The Wretched Ones have come out from behind the walls to dine.

*No, no, no, no, no!* Lindsey thinks, closing her eyes tightly and taking a breath so deep she almost blacks out. *There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nothing to be afraid of. There's nothing to be afraid of.* Slowly, she rises to her feet and opens her eyes.

Her father was so very, very wrong.

At first glance, the living room seems to be covered with them. They are climbing on the sofa, the television, the windowsill and the coffee table. They dot the floor like checkers on a full game board. If she has to guess, there are at least two-dozen of them. She only has a fraction of a second to make any kind of distinction before the evil wave advances upon her en masse.

They all appear to be between a foot and a foot and a half in length, of various shapes and sizes. There are fat ones, thin ones, muscular ones, tall, lanky, short and stubby ones. They come in different colors, primarily green, beige, yellow and gray. Some of them wear clothing patched together from lost articles of fabric and tattered drapery. Some are completely, savagely naked. Since the light isn't so bright, the batch in the living room has no need for blindfolds as the one on the banister did. Their eyes are all open, greedy and piercing. Small hands with no common number of digits clutch at weapons cobbled together out of whatever they could find, mostly knives

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and daggers, pieces of glass, a couple of spears, and if Lindsey isn't mistaken, a crude bow and arrow or two. Some are branded while others have very tribalistic tattoos. The fiercest of them is the most covered. They all have sharp claws and jagged, glistening teeth. Moving towards Lindsey, some growl, some let out traditional war cries and others press on in grim, silent determination. They are on their prey in a matter of seconds.

During those brief seconds, Lindsey can barely bring herself to a state of comprehension let alone a state in which to properly react. She doesn't flee or even take a defensive posture. Her mind reels for some sort of reference point, but comes up blank. All she can think of before they descend upon her is that they are like an angry swarm of bees. As they attack, the reference is as good as any, and as equally unimportant.

The first of the Wretched Ones to reach her slashes out with a sharp piece of broken glass and catches her along the left ankle just below the cuff of her pajamas. The cut is long, but superficial. Lindsey yelps in pain and raises her foot in the air as the hissing creature takes another swipe at her.

Their target off-balance, the Wretched Ones shift their attack towards Lindsey's right leg. Before she can reposition her left foot in order to move the right, a creature with three eyes, two in the center of its face and the redundant third on the upper left of its misshapen cranium, dashes forward with a Bic pen, the plastic tip sharpened into a shiv, and drives it into the top of her foot.

Howling in pain, the pen still imbedded in her, Lindsey reflexively kicks at the monster as it tries to retrieve its weapon. The blow connects with the thing and sends it flying halfway across the room. It lands next to the mess of the destroyed ficus plant, picks up a jagged piece of the shattered porcelain pot and hops to its feet, charging back into the fray.

If not complete comprehension, a sense of self-preservation returns to Lindsey at last and she attempts to defend herself against the horde. She kicks out with her

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feet as she hops up and down, trying to dodge as many of the blows coming her way as possible. She is only partially successful, and within half a minute, her pajama bottoms are torn and tattered, the skin beneath covered with numerous abrasions. The pale complexion of her lower half is turning a sticky red.

As her defensive flailing becomes more and more manic, she doesn't notice the Wretched One with the extra set of arms sprouting out of its shoulder blades climbing up her pajama leg. Three of its hands cling to the fabric while the fourth carries a dagger carved out of the bones of some unfortunate animal. By the time Lindsey senses the extra weight at her hip; the creature plunges the dagger deeply into her abdomen.

For a moment she thinks she is going to pass out. Clutching the wound, she drops onto her knees and slumps over, the blazing heat radiating from her stomach momentarily blocking out all thought. Even sound seems to be a thing of the past. The lull of sleep and an escape from the nightmare she has found herself in is almost too inviting. The only thing that keeps her from succumbing to the blessed oblivion and certain death is the sight of the four-armed Wretched One creeping towards her prone body. It moves slowly, as if hypnotized by the steady throbbing of the carotid artery in her exposed neck. Believing the end to be at hand, the rest of the brood stop and watch intently. Lindsey barely notices. Her whole attention is focused on the small, dripping dagger in the filthy monster's hand. The dagger dripping blood. Her blood.

*My blood*, she thinks, from a point somewhere far back in her unconscious mind where the primeval urge to survive, to enact revenge, resides. *That's my blood. This is my house. That little bastard is gonna pay!*

Reaching out quickly, Lindsey grabs a hold of the Wretched One with all of her strength. With her right hand clamped around its hardened body and her left gripping its deformed head, she twists in opposite directions as if she's opening an extremely tight bottle of cheese whiz, and the creature's head pops off. A vile fluid, almost neon

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green in color, bubbles up from the stump where it used to be attached.

Tossing the remains to the floor, Lindsey slowly rises to her feet while the group of Wretched Ones watches her with reverence, awe and perhaps even fear. With her jaw clenched and lips curled back in a snarl, she lets out a low, almost inhuman growl. She snatches the nearest Wretched One from off of the floor before it can back up and join the others. While it squeals like a pig and fights against her grip, Lindsey pulls back her arm in the classic baseball pitcher stance and hurls it towards the living room window. Lindsey is a small girl, and on any other day, the thing would have bounced harmlessly off of the pane. But tonight, as enraged as she is, she taps a reservoir of strength she never knew she was capable of. The creature crashes through the window and shards of glass fall to the floor in its wake. A cold gust of wind sends in a generous amount of swirling snow.

Lindsey dashes past the disoriented Wretched Ones and quickly picks up a large piece of the glass, not noticing as its sharp edges cut into the palm of her hand. Raising it above her head like a scimitar, she turns, legs braced, and stares down at the monsters before her.

“You want some of this?” She asks coldly.

The Wretched Ones don’t react immediately. They don’t swarm towards her as they had before when intending to take her by surprise. Instead, as if communicating telepathically, they all slowly move apart like Moses’ waves until they form two groups on either side of the room, flanking the one who remains in the center. Lindsey doesn’t need to know anything about their rituals to know that the one with whom she now finds herself in a classic western standoff is the Wretched Ones’ most feared warrior. It’s black and red tattoos almost completely cover the light blue of its skin. It has large arms and thick thighs. A bandolier is wrapped across its wide chest. Dangling from it is a collection of small, polished rat and bird skulls. Its nails are at least an inch long and its incisor teeth are twice as long as those. From the scabbard hanging on the small belt made of twine

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around it's waist, the creature pulls out a very sharp weapon stained the color of rust. It closely resembles a meat cleaver. The thing furrows it's brow and smirks mischievously.

"Bring it on." Lindsey says, bracing herself for the creature's onslaught. The adrenaline that had momentarily replaced her terror is pretty much depleted, but as long as the other Wretched One's are content with sitting back and watching the confrontation, not taking part in it, she has no fear of losing. No matter how fierce their fiercest warrior might be, it's still less than two feet tall and she can take it easily. "Let's see what you got."

With the smirk on it's face turning into a knowing grin, the creature raises the makeshift meat cleaver above it's head and flings it across the room. It misses Lindsey by a couple of feet, but doesn't miss the intended mark. It severs the cord providing electricity to the room's single lamp just to the left of the broken window. Everything is suddenly doused in total darkness.

No amount of adrenaline can rescue Lindsey from the fear that correspondingly overtakes her. She tries to remember exactly where the creature had been standing only a moment before and uselessly throws the piece of glass in her hand in that general direction. She doesn't hear the sound it makes when it shatters harmlessly on the floor. The sound of the entire fast approaching Wretched Ones drowns out everything else.

Within a moment they are upon her, and a few moments after that, she succumbs to a darkness deeper than that of the living room.

She awakens later to the sound of voices. Human voices.

She is intubated and in a bed at the hospital. Bandages almost too numerous to count cover the vast majority of her body. To keep her from reopening her many wounds by sudden movements, her wrists and ankles have been firmly restrained. Her eyes open slowly and she sees the nurse and doctor talking in the doorway. With the

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tube in her throat she can't speak and they don't notice she has regained consciousness.

"Poor thing, it's just horrible." The nurse, Rebecca O'Brien, says sympathetically.

"Damndest thing I've ever seen." The doctor replies. "Have you told her father yet?"

"No, not yet, Dr. King. He hasn't awoken from the surgery. But I did just as you suggested. After he told you about his daughter being home alone and we couldn't reach her by telephone, I drove over to their house right away. With the weather being as bad as it is it took me a lot longer than it normally should have. I rang the bell, but got no answer. I was about to give up, thinking she must have gone over to a friend's house when I noticed the window was broken. The door was unlocked so I let myself in and found her like that on the floor in the hallway."

"Who could have done something like that to a little girl?" The doctor asks.

"I don't know. When I walked in all of the lights were off. I had to turn on the one in the hallway to see where I was going. For a second it looked like there were, I don't know how else to explain it, rats or something all over her body. When I turned the light on they scattered like cockroaches so I didn't get a good look at them. It seems to me like they were dragging her out of the living room. Like they were taking her someplace else."

"Rats, eh?" The doctor says, disbelievingly.

"Well, there was something in the house with her."

"I say we should still get the rape kit nonetheless. Oh, and just in case, we should notify Child Services as well. Any house that has rats the size they'd have to be to do this to a healthy young girl is no place to raise a kid. We'll need to bring this up to the father when he regains consciousness as well."

"Right away, doctor."

"Horrible thing that's happened to this family." The doctor muses. "Mom ran out on them a few years back. Oldest son is in the oncology unit dying of leukemia. Father gets into a bad car wreck on the slippery roads and



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now this. Well, come on, we have other patients to check on.”

“Should I keep the light on, doctor?”

“No. God willing, if she wakes up, she’ll just think she’s safe at home in her own bed.”

Rebecca switches off the light and the two of them continue on their rounds further down the hall.

For a second, after the light goes out, Lindsey starts to panic. She calms down when she remembers she’s in the hospital, far away from the Wretched Ones back at her house. She worries about her dad and brother, but still almost slips into sleep, riding the wave of soothing, repetitive sounds made by the ventilator providing her oxygen and the rhythmic beeping of the machines monitoring her vitals. She almost falls asleep believing there is nothing to be afraid of.

But then the familiar sounds of scratching and giggling start to emanate from behind the walls. Unable to scream, barely able to move, there is nothing for Lindsey to do.

But listen.

And wait.

And tell herself over and over again... there’s nothing to be afraid of.

## **THE END**

## **Tale #1**

### **Tomorrow's Gift**

Ron came across the garage sale the weekend before his wife's 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was a big fan of the garage sale, yard sale, rummage sale, any kind of sale in which you could root through other people's 'junk' and purchase odds and ends at a very cheap price. At times he bought things he needed, but mostly he was looking for collectibles to sell on ebay or other online auction sites for a major profit. Most of the people who hosted sales of these kinds never knew what it was they had or what it was actually worth. First edition books. Old records. Vintage comics. Toys and rare baseball and hockey cards. More often than not, the sellers were older than Hades and had simply decided to finally get rid of all the clutter in the attic, unaware that they were sitting on, or in the case of attic clutter, under, a gold mine. Ron figured in the past five years he had spent no more than a couple hundred dollars and easily cleared over 5 grand in online sales.

But he wasn't looking for any collectibles this time. He was looking for a birthday present. Something nice. Something cheap. Although he'd never admit it to her, and could barely admit it to himself, Ron felt that Becky, his wife of 13 years, wasn't worth spending a lot of money on. Not anymore, at least. Something rustic he could pass off as antique, but that actually cost him no more than 10 or 20 bucks tops would do. They had been married for 13 years, lucky 13, but less than half of those had been happy. As time went by and no children came (he was cursed at birth with a narrow urethra, now he was cursed for life with an unfulfilled wife), she had grown more and more bitter. Even if the urethra suddenly expanded to the size of the Lincoln Tunnel, the frequency with which they now had sex would probably still leave them childless.

Except for his wife constantly aggravating him about it, Ron was glad they never had any children. It wouldn't seem fair. A kid would only make things slightly

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better now, which would mean they only hated each other slightly less. A house with that little love in it was no place to bring up a kid.

Searching through the stack of assorted junk at the garage sale (actually a yard sale, the couple holding it had no garage), he came across a nice, leather-bound diary with a gold clasp and 365 unsoiled pages. The sellers were asking seven dollars for it and he talked them down to five. Just like that, he had his wife's present.

He brought it home, hid it in the back of his sock drawer and forgot about it until the weekend. Becky was in an extremely foul mood, the birthday reminding her that another whole year had gone by without a baby. Ron often wondered why she didn't just leave him for someone who could provide her with one. He figured she enjoyed making his life a living hell as much as the idea of motherhood. Why he hadn't left her, surprisingly, never crossed his mind.

Becky, frowning, opened her present.

"What the hell is this supposed to be?" She scoffed. "A diary?"

"Yeah," Ron said, trying to talk up the gift. "I know we've been having some problems lately. With this you can have an outlet to vent all of your frustrations."

"I already have an outlet. You." She said, smiling at her own acidity as she flipped through the pages. Her vindictive smile quickly returned to the previous, almost pervasive frown. "What the fuck is this? You give me a diary for my birthday and you've already filled in a bunch of the pages?"

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked, taking the book away from her.

He knew she must have been mistaken or hallucinating. But as he looked through the pages, he realized a few previously blank sheets were now indeed filled with his own familiar handwriting.

*MONDAY – Went to the grocery store to....*

*TUESDAY – Had a meeting with Jim and....*

*WEDNESDAY – Got into a fight with Becky over....*

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He was as confused as Becky, but for a different reason. The diary had gone into his sock drawer the day he bought it and hadn't come out since. He had no recollection of ever writing in its pages. But here, in his familiar handwriting, was proof that he had. Scanning through it again, he stopped on today's date and read the entry. It was kind of hard; the pages were smeared with some kind of red stain.

*SATURDAY – I gave Becky the diary for her birthday and she hated it. The weird thing is she hated it because I had already written in it. Now, I had no memory of ever having done so. Looking through it, it turned out she was right. I couldn't figure out what happened, but later in the evening, after taking Becky's shit for a couple of hours, I figured it out when I discovered that tomorrow's entry had appeared on its own. The diary tells the future. Not the distant future; it only fills itself in one day ahead at a time. And not any future details that could be of any beneficial use to me, just personal, day-to-day shit. I couldn't use this thing to, say, play the markets or bet on the big game.*

*So hey, me, that's right, I'm talking to you. The earlier me. You're sitting there, having moments ago just given the bitch this book. You're listening to her complain about it right now. If you wanna save yourself an evening of putting up with Becky's grief, take a look at tomorrow's entry and get a head start. I just did, so do us both a favor, why don't ya?*

"Hey, dummy!" Becky said, slapping the top of the table to get her husband's attention. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Ron said, looking up from the next day's entry. "Nothing at all."

*SUNDAY – Last night I killed my wife.*

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# The Thing in the Hospital Hall

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*For Howard Phillips Lovecraft  
and Stuart Gordon*

### 1

Gordon Murray woke before the alarm clock was set to interrupt his slumber with the noise that always signified the end of good dreams and the beginning of another shitty day at work. Confused by rising so early, he at first incorrectly thought it was the weekend. He never set the alarm on his days off and he never awoke before its annoying buzz. He wasn't a morning person by nature and staying up late at night watching horror movies and cable pornography always left him with only six hours of sleep or less to begin with. If his alarm didn't go off he could easily sleep until the early afternoon every day.

But it wasn't the weekend. It was Tuesday and he had a pile of callbacks waiting for him on the desk in his tiny cubicle at work. He had stayed up later than normal last night, watching the late night creature feature, which had shown the three pictures producer Val Lewton made with horror legend Boris Karloff - *The Body Snatcher*, *Isle of the Dead* and *Bedlam* - so there was little to no chance he would have naturally gotten up before 7 a.m. and the buzzing from hell. He probably would have hit the snooze button the maximum number of times to still allow enough leeway to catch the later bus and only be 10 minutes tardy for work as well. As it was, he awoke at exactly 6:22 a.m.

*What the hell is going on?* He started to think before the thought was eradicated by a tremendous jolt of pain emanating in his lower back that quickly spreading along half of his chest.

"God dammit almighty Jesus." He barely managed to whisper through clenched teeth. He rolled over onto his right side and took quick, shallow breaths. He broke out in a heavy sweat and pulled his legs up into the fetal position. He was in so much pain he felt like he was going to burst into tears. He was also terrified.

"God oh God oh God what's wrong with me? Please help, help, help." He spoke aloud instead of in silent

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prayer, thinking that would somehow give the words more weight with the man upstairs. The man who, except for in moments like these, Gordon wholeheartedly didn't even believe in.

Realizing his own hypocrisy, he calmed a bit. He could take slightly deeper breaths than before, and as long as he didn't move around too much, the pain didn't get any worse. It wasn't, however, getting any better.

Mentally preparing himself as best he could for the pain he knew would undoubtedly occur, Gordon slowly rolled onto his back and then onto his left hip, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Sitting upright, his chest throbbing worse than before, he attempted to take a few deep breaths and failed. Each time he tried, a sharp, intense pain raced across his chest. It hurt so badly he almost lay back down in the only position that had afforded him any sort of comfort thus far.

Instead, he slowly got to his feet, and hunched over, awkwardly made his way into the living room. The place was still a mess from the previous night's classic horror movie marathon. A half-empty 2L bottle of Dr. Pepper sat on the floor next to a coffee table covered with an overflowing ashtray, two chocolate bar wrappers, an empty bag of Lays potato chips, a half-empty container of ranch dip and an empty plate coated with the caked on cheese that had dripped from the corners of his four Pillsbury Pizza Pockets. How he could eat shit like that and still weigh less than 150 pounds had always been a mystery to him and a bane to every fat acquaintance he ever had.

Taking a seat on the sofa across from the dirty coffee table while still clutching his left side as if his innards were about to spill out onto the carpet, he tried, unsuccessfully, to tell himself that the pain was slowly starting to dissipate. In actuality, the agony only subsided momentarily when he held in his stomach and tensed up his whole body. The minute he tried to relax it would return to the previously unbearable level.

*I'm having a heart attack,* Gordon thought. *That's what's going on here, a Goddamn heart attack. Should this come as*



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*any surprise? I may only be 21-years old, but I eat the worst shit possible, nothing but deep fried garbage drowned in salt, and I smoke like a motherfucker. Oh my God, it's true; I'm having a Goddamn heart attack!*

Although upset by the thought of his body failing him, Gordon didn't lash out. He didn't grab the half full glass of flat soda from off of the coffee table and hurl it against the wall. He didn't shout or even curse loudly.

Alone in his apartment, Gordon began to weep.

And although he was alone, he still felt sufficiently embarrassed enough to take a moment to regain his composure before picking up the phone and dialing 9-1-1 to tell someone he was dying.

### 2

"You're not dying." The old, overweight receptionist at the triage desk of the local hospital said to Gordon some time later. She spoke the words like a veteran, having had to utter them at least two dozen times already this shift as she had for every shift over the past 20 years.

"How can you be so sure?" Gordon asked, his pain only nominally better from the medication administered by the Emergency Medical Technicians who picked him up and deposited him at the hospital. "It still really hurts."

"I'm sure it does, but you're not dying, I promise you. The boys who brought you in would have been a little more excited if you were."

"Then what's wrong with me?"

"I don't know. The EMT'S didn't tell me. But a doctor will once you sign in and take a seat over there."

Gordon followed the direction of the receptionist's pointing finger and looked to the crowded waiting room just left of the automatic doors where the paramedics had wheeled him in. There were only two-dozen chairs for people to sit in, but there was at least twice that many people in the small section. Most of them were old. However, scattered among them were a few

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young men, mostly general laborers, with bloody wounds on their hands or forearms. Their cuts were temporarily staunches with damp cloth. There were a few mothers with crying, fidgeting children. In the corner, bolted to the ceiling, a small television set with the volume turned down was showing the local news and Gordon resented the chipper, pretty news anchor's good health. The thought of having to wait his turn in there didn't cause Gordon to feel any frustration, but rather a strong sense of apprehension. *What if there really is something wrong with me, he thought, and we're wasting valuable time?*

"Look," Gordon said, turning back to the receptionist and trying to remain calm. "I appreciate the situation here, but...."

"No, I don't think you do, young man." She replied, trying to keep the rising annoyance out of her voice, but failing miserably. "Do you see that larger woman over there? The one in the brown coat? Well, she's having a heart attack too. It's her third this month. When she sees Doctor Samuels, it'll turn out to be another case of acid reflux caused by all of the spicy food she eats. Do you see the burly workman over in the corner? The one holding the rag to his hand? That cut, at worst, may need two or three stitches. He swears to God almighty that he's gonna lose his finger. Swears something in the dark took a bite out of him when in truth he probably did it on purpose. We have a construction team working on the eighth floor and we see these guys all day long trying to get worker's comp. So now, seeing as how you can appreciate the situation, why don't you go and take a seat."

"But I...." Gordon began.

"Sit."

Even though still in excruciating pain and unable to take a deep breath, Gordon, to avoid further confrontation, was about to comply and join the rest of the sickly mob when a voice far more pleasing to the ears than the receptionist's stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir, can you hold on one moment?"

Gordon turned to find that the owner of the voice was a young intern, perhaps only a few years older than

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himself. Even in his current state of distress, he was instantly smitten. The girl was downright beautiful. Her nametag read Rebecca O'Brien.

"Hi." Gordon said foolishly, as if she was simply approaching him on the street and not in the hospital where she was caregiver and he care needer.

"What's the problem?"

"Well, I woke up this morning with a sharp pain in my chest and left arm. There's shortness of breath...."

"Un-hunh, un-hunh," She said, appearing to only half-listen. She pulled out a stethoscope, and lifting the front of Gordon's shirt, placed the cold pad against his chest. "Can you take a deep breath for me?"

Gordon tried, wincing in pain after only taking half a mouthful of air.

"Does that hurt?"

"Oh yeah." Gordon answered, grimacing. "A lot."

"Can you give me another one?"

"What part of it hurting a lot did you not understand?" Gordon asked, trying to make the comment come off sounding like a joke even though he was completely serious. *Can't you just fucking fix this thing now?* He shouted in his head.

"Just a couple more, I promise." Rebecca said, soothingly. "Trust me."

Gordon complied, and after listening intently to his chest and back, Rebecca turned to the receptionist manning the triage station.

"We need to get him admitted right away. I'll go and get Doctor King."

"What?" The receptionist said. Conflicting emotions of anger for having her authority questioned and fear for possibly having jeopardized a patient's life simultaneously crossed her features. The result was comical. "Why?"

"I think this man has had a spontaneous pneumo thorax."

"What?" Gordon asked, echoing the receptionist's shock. Fear of his mortality was beginning to return. "What's that?"

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“A collapsed lung.” Rebecca replied. “It’s actually pretty common amongst people with similar height, weight and complexion.”

“You’re telling me my lung collapsed because I’m a tall, skinny white guy?”

“Pretty much.” Rebecca said, smiling. “Don’t worry, it’s not too dangerous. But we do want to get you onto a heart monitor just in case. And we’ll need to give you a Heimlich as well.”

“Like the maneuver?”

“Not quite. It’s a valve we use to let the air out of the chest cavity to re-inflate your lung. There’s a small abrasion somewhere along the sac that is slowly leaking air into the cavity. With nowhere to go, the excess air is actually crushing your lung. The Heimlich will relieve that pressure and you’ll feel a whole lot better. I hope you’re not afraid of needles.”

“I’m not a big fan.” Gordon said morosely.

“Again, don’t worry. You’re going to be fine. We’re going to take great care of you.”

“Okay.” Gordon said to no one in particular, his mind preoccupied with trying to process all of the information he had just received. He should be sitting down at his desk getting ready to call his first potential customer to see if they would be interested in signing up for a new Visa credit card, not in some hospital about to be hooked up to a heart monitor and have a needle rammed into his side. *Well*, he thought, *at least I get out of work.*

As Gordon tried to make the best out of the unpleasant turn of events, the receptionist leaned closer to the young intern and whispered in her ear.

“Are you sure he’s not exaggerating?”

“See his throat? See how it’s shifted almost an inch to the right? It’s trying to compensate. You know, Martha, some of the people who come in here really do need our help.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Martha said bitterly.

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“Okay, Mr...?” Rebecca asked, turning back around to face Gordon. After a brief second of confusion, he answered her. “Okay then, Mr. Murray, Martha here is going to get the paperwork started and I’m going to go and find Doctor King. Sound good?”

“Sounds fantastic.” Gordon said with about as much enthusiasm as he could muster. It was little, seeing as how he had no say in the matter whatsoever.

“So, Mr. Murray,” Martha said, pen and clipboard in hand. “Do you have any close relatives?”

“Umm, no.” Gordon replied, confused by the question, but willing to answer it promptly and without comment if it meant the process of getting better started sooner rather than later.

“Excellent.” Martha said, scribbling his answer on her chart.

If he hadn’t been in so much pain, Gordon may not only have questioned why the woman’s first inquiry hadn’t been about a family physician, previous history or even a home address, but also why she seemed to take such joy in his lonely answer.

### 3

Gordon was admitted a short time later, but not until after being checked out by Doctor King. The process included more deep breaths and numerous x-rays. Rebecca’s original diagnosis turned out to be correct. His left lung had completely collapsed. He was given a local anesthetic before receiving a small incision between two ribs just a few inches below his armpit. A tube was snaked into his body and then attached to the plastic Heimlich that was about four inches in length. He instantly felt better. Except for some minor discomfort, he was actually starting to feel fine.

“Well,” Doctor King told him. “Don’t celebrate just yet. We’re going to keep you here for a while longer to see if your lung is capable of staying inflated on its own long enough to start repairing the tear. If we remove that tube before then, the lung will simply collapse again.”

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A few hours passed and there were more x-rays. The anesthetic wore off and the pain in his left side returned. He ignored it as long as possible, hoping it would just go away on its own and he'd be allowed to leave. A second series of x-rays indicated that the lung was slowly collapsing again. The Heimlich was not venting the air at a fast enough rate. He was admitted to the third floor, and by the evening, was sharing a room with Sebastian Albert, a retired English professor and father of four. Sebastian had come to the hospital after hurting his leg attempting to water ski for the first time at his cottage over the weekend. Concerned by something he detected, Doctor King had him admitted while they ran further tests. Sebastian was fast asleep and snoring loudly when they wheeled Gordon into the room.

The Heimlich in Gordon's side had been attached to a post-operative pump when it became clear that it alone wouldn't be enough to heal the injury. The pump, about the size of a small briefcase, was continuously sucking the air out of his chest cavity. A see-through section along the face of the machine contained a clear liquid that continued to bubble as long as air was still leaking from his lung. He watched it as intently as one would a boiling pot and got about the same results.

Lifting the device off of his lap, Gordon awkwardly rose from the wheelchair and made his way over to the bed on the far side of the room. He handed the older nurse the post-op pump and she hooked it along the guardrail, plugging it into an electrical socket just out of sight as he climbed under the covers.

"There's a phone and a TV for you to use during your stay. The phone costs 10 dollars a week and the television costs five dollars for every two days or 15 dollars for a week. You've got to pay for the whole week in advance, however. No refunds."

"Five dollars for only two days?" Gordon asked, amused. "On *this* TV?"

"Yes." The nurse replied coldly. "Is there a problem with that?"

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“Well, it’s just that the TV is a bit small. And it looks older than Doctor King!”

Gordon’s attempt at levity did nothing to alter the nurse’s apparently perpetual sour mood. *Perhaps because she looks as old as Doctor King’s mother*, Gordon thought, laughing inside.

“Ya want it or not?” the nurse asked curtly.

“Yeah, I’ll take it. It’s not like I’ve got anything else to do with my time.”

“What about the phone?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ve already let my job know I won’t be in for a couple of days.”

“There’s no one else you would want to call?”

“No one else worth calling, actually.”

“Very good.” The nurse said, as content with his lonely answer much as Martha the receptionist had been. “The TV will be working first thing in the morning. I will be by with some more pain medication for you shortly.”

“Okay, thanks.” Gordon said politely. “Good night.”

Shutting the light off as she went, the nurse was gone before Gordon even finished his sentence. In the dark, the sound of his companion’s loud snoring was his only comfort. Gordon attempted to find a suitable position in which to sleep. Considering the tube sticking out of his side, it wasn’t easy. He eventually dozed, but his slumber was troubled by a series of awful dreams.

### 4

Gordon awoke from one of these nightmares confused, not knowing immediately where he was. Although the nurse had been in to wake him up twice already, offering pills and a small plastic cup of water with which to wash them down, it still took him a few seconds to remember that he was in the hospital. Assuming the nurse was back with more medication, he looked around for her expectantly. The pain in his side from the Heimlich had returned and he was looking forward to the temporary relief afforded him by the pills.

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Save for Sebastian and himself, the room was empty. He peered into the darkness, thinking in his foggy state of mind that he might have missed someone if they were standing in the shadows.

But no, the room was empty.

Turning on his side, he regarded Sebastian lying on the other bed. The man's large gut was a black mass rising and falling steadily, silhouetted against the light from the hallway coming in through the open door just beyond him. After a few moments, and without awakening, he let out a loud, long fart that was only slightly muffled by the mattress.

"Jesus Christ." Gordon said, laughing. He quickly covered his mouth so as not to awaken and possibly embarrass his roommate. It was the first moment of levity since his admittance. Smiling, he leaned forward in his bed, being mindful of his injured side. He strained his ears to try and better hear any future flatulence while, at the same time, trying to imagine what it would sound like. *This is disgusting*, he thought, *but what the hell else do I have to do to keep myself busy? I think I must be going somewhat crazy to cope.* He started giggling to himself again, but quickly quieted to hear everything as clearly as possible.

At first there was only silence, but then, instead of the familiar and childish humorous sound of someone passing gas, he heard a thump coming from nearby in the hallway. It was followed by a scuttling sound reminiscent of a hundred fingers drumming on a desk. It stopped and was followed by another, louder thump. Then the scuttling resumed.

"What the hell?" Gordon mumbled, leaning further forward, trying even harder to listen.

The sounds were getting closer and soon, after each thump and in conjunction with the scuttling, he could hear what sounded like a wet towel being dragged across the floor. As the source of the disturbance was about to reach his door, Gordon leaned as far out of the bed as the post-operative pump would allow. He could see the shadow of something growing larger on the wall outside



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the door. He was positive he heard a raspy, haggard breathing as well.

“C’mon, C’mon,” he said quietly, intrigued, excited and somewhat frightened all at the same time. “What are you?”

As if in response to his question, just as the thing was about to come into view, Sebastian let out another gigantic fart. To Gordon, as hypersensitive as his hearing had become, it sounded like a gunshot going off just a few feet from his head. Screaming, he jumped backwards in the bed. The noise roused Sebastian, who immediately sat up, almost as startled as Gordon was.

“Hunh, whassat? What’s going on?” He said incoherently. Seeing Gordon across the room, he was about to ask what happened when he suddenly smelled the air around him. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Jesus, sorry kid. I sure hope you can’t smell that over on your side of the room. It’s the damn food they serve in this place. Wreaks havoc on the digestive system.”

“What? No, it’s fine.” Gordon answered, leaning forward again to try and see past Sebastian to the door behind him. “You didn’t just happen to see something go by outside, did you?”

“No. Why?” Sebastian asked, turning to inspect the empty hallway. “Did you see something?”

“Yes. Well, no, actually I didn’t. I think I was about to, though.”

“It was probably just a nurse doing her rounds.” Sebastian said, lying back down. “Don’t give it much thought. They come and go every couple of hours.”

“I don’t think so.” Gordon said hesitantly. “I think it was something else. Something, maybe, not quite human.”

It was now Sebastian’s turn to laugh at his roommate. His hearty guffaw was completely without scorn.

“Tell me something, son. How many of those pills have you had tonight? The red ones?”

“Four, I think.”

“And the smaller blue ones?”

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“Two.”

“Well, there ya go.” Sebastian said, continuing to chuckle. “You’re all doped up and starting to see things. You should enjoy it. A lot of kids your age pay for that kind of experience.”

“I didn’t actually see anything, remember?”

“Well, it’s got you hearing some strange things, then. You just need to relax. You’ve obviously had a traumatic day; it’s to be expected. I suggest you try and get back to sleep. You’re going to need your rest if you want to make a speedy recovery. Goodnight.”

The moment Sebastian stopped talking he almost instantly feel back asleep. Gordon, on the other hand, lay awake for some time after that, staring at the ceiling, nervously listening for the sound of the thing’s return. It didn’t come. All he heard before slipping back into sleep were a few more farts coming from his slumbering roommate.

This time, however, they didn’t make him laugh.

### 5

The next day, Gordon attempted to talk to Sebastian about what had happened the night before. He got nowhere. Every time he tried to bring up the topic, Sebastian would just shrug it off and chalk it up, again, to the pain medication Gordon was on. He would then, in no subtle way, change the subject.

Sebastian talked about his life, what it had been like being a professor, the joys of being retired and the joys of parenthood. He told him about how he had hurt his leg water skiing and how much he hoped he wouldn’t be in the hospital long, wanting to get back to the cottage to spend the rest of the weekend with his family. Since the kids had grown up and moved out, he didn’t get to spend time with them that often. Even against his protestations, he was only another day’s stay away from his family calling off the rest of the planned trip to come and be by his side. For every way Gordon had of trying to bring up the thing

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in the hospital hall, it seemed Sebastian had a dozen more anecdotes, each longer than the last, to deflect it.

By mid-afternoon, however, it was Sebastian who got them back on Gordon's original topic of choice after he had long given up on it.

"You're into all of that horror stuff?" Sebastian asked, genuinely interested.

"Oh, yeah." Gordon said. "I love it. Books. Movies. Video games. Comics. I collect all of it if its horror related."

"I'm not a big fan, myself. I enjoyed *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Caligari*, but that might just be the academic snob in me coming out. My kids love it, though, so I'm not totally out of the loop. I suppose you're into all the blood and guts movies they make nowadays. Who's your favorite? Pinhead? Michael Myers?"

"They're good, but I really like Eddie."

"Is he the one with the hockey mask?"

"No, that's Jason from the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* films. Eddie's from the *Slice N' Dice* franchise."

"I knew it. You are into all of that splatter stuff."

"I am. But I also love the classics, too. The Universal Monster movies. Val Lewton. Hammer. The Poe pictures Vincent Price made with Roger Corman."

"Hold up there, kid." Sebastian said, chuckling. "You're losing me. I don't understand half of what you just said. I taught *The Shining* by Stephen King in my contemporary literature class and that's about as much as I know. The kids enjoyed that one a lot more than James Joyce, that's for sure. Maybe because they thought they could just watch the movie and I wouldn't catch on. I watched the movie myself just to be able to catch them if they did, but my knowledge of horror pretty much stays in the realm of literature."

"Stephen King is my favorite author." Gordon said excitedly.

"Well, it's no surprise that you thought you saw something strange lurking in the hallway last night then, seeing as what you're into."

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Gordon frowned. He had wanted to discuss what he had almost seen all morning long and now he was being dismissed before he could even start. He was upset that he had to go on the defensive.

"I didn't actually see anything last night." Gordon said calmly, trying to sound as rational as he felt. "I heard it. It was coming up the hall and it was just about to pass our doorway when you woke up and blocked the hall from my view. I couldn't see it, but it was there nonetheless."

"Okay, what did it sound like?"

"There was a loud, periodic thump. Then what sounded like a bunch of crabs? There was a wet, slurpy noise too, and gurgly, ragged breathing."

"That sounds more like Lovecraft than King to me." Sebastian said.

"I read Lovecraft, too."

"Well, there ya go then."

Before Gordon could respond, Rebecca O'Brien, the young intern who helped Gordon sidestep the beaurocratic red tape at reception, walked into the room. She looked even more attractive to him than she had the previous morning. He was torn between carrying on the conversation with Sebastian and looking like a total nutcase in front of her or keeping his damn mouth shut. Before he could make a decision, Sebastian did it for him.

"My dear," He said, addressing Rebecca as she approached his bedside. "Could you please inform Mr. Murray that there are no creatures from the Necronomicon roaming the hallways here at night?"

"Pardon me?" Rebecca said, amused. "I don't have the slightest idea what you two are talking about."

"I thought I almost saw something last night." Gordon said dejectedly.

"In the hallway?" Rebecca asked.

"Yeah."

"It was probably just a nurse making her rounds."

"That's what I told him." Sebastian said proudly.

Trying to remain neutral, Rebecca moved over to Gordon's side of the room and tried to change the subject.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Murray?"

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“Better, but still kind of sore. Please, call me Gordon.”

“Okay, Gordon. You can call me Rebecca.” Kneeling down, she began to inspect the tube coming out of Gordon’s side and the post-operative pump into which it ran. “I’m still seeing some bubbles here so I guess that means you’ll be staying with us a few more days. I’ll let Doctor King know immediately. I’m taking Sebastian down to see him right now to run a couple of tests. It seems like your stay has been temporarily extended as well, sir.”

“Fantastic.” Sebastian said, throwing his arms up in the air in mock surrender. “My family’s going to eat me alive, they’ll be so angry. We’ve been planning this getaway for months.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.” Rebecca said, going back to Sebastian’s bedside and helping him into the wheelchair she had brought into the room. “They’ll be a little concerned, yes, but I don’t think they’ll be too angry with you.”

“You don’t know my family, doc.” Sebastian said, smiling. “Well, let’s get this show on the road. Sooner we get the tests done the sooner I can go home.”

“I wish all of my patients had that kind of easy going attitude, Mr. Albert.”

“It’s easy to be easy going when you have no say in the matter, my dear.” Sebastian said.

“Excuse me, Rebecca?” Gordon asked hesitantly, embarrassed for holding her up and nervous about how she would react to his request. “It wasn’t just a noise in the hallway last night. It was... something else.”

In the wheelchair, Sebastian rolled his eyes and looked away, trying to give them the appearance of privacy.

“I’m not sure I’m following you, Gordon.”

“Can you keep an eye out for anything, well, strange? Anything out of the ordinary?”

“I’ve only been working here for a couple of months, but the hospital seems pretty ordinary to me.” Rebecca said. “Except the whole staff is really, really old.”

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“Now you just hold your tongue right there a minute, missy.” Sebastian said, pretending to be offended. “Most of the folks around here aren’t much older than yours truly.”

“Well,” Rebecca said, laughing. “Don’t make me challenge you to a water skiing competition to prove my point.”

“Touché.” Sebastian said. “You’re a firecracker, darling. That’s why I love you.”

Gordon hated feeling like he was being made fun of, even if it was only in a playful manner. He hated the thought of losing the opportunity to utilize Rebecca’s eyes and ears outside of the confines of his room even more.

“Could you just look around a little bit, please? Maybe some of the other staff has seen something?”

“Okay, Gordon.” Rebecca said, probably just to bring about an end to the conversation before he could embarrass himself further. “Now you relax. I’ll be by tomorrow afternoon with a full report. I promise.”

Rebecca wheeled Sebastian out of the room, leaving Gordon alone with his thoughts. *Perhaps everyone’s right and I’m just being stubborn*, he thought. *Maybe I’m making up monsters in the middle of the night to alleviate my own boredom. That’s gotta be it. That and the drugs, like Sebastian says.* Gordon knew he was trying to convince himself that he hadn’t heard anything peculiar the night before. He also knew that, as little fun as being in the hospital was, it would be a whole lot worse if everyone thought he was crazy and started handling him with kid’s gloves. Especially Rebecca. He would have to start being more careful whom he spoke to and what he said when he did.

Just then, the elderly nurse from the night before came into his room carrying a clipboard and a pen to make payment arrangements for the TV. Later, even after three straight hours of daytime talk shows and soap operas, Gordon couldn’t get thoughts of the creature in the hallway out of his head.

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### 6

Later that night, in the funny way that life can sometimes be so coincidental, Gordon was flipping through the channels of his small TV and came upon *Re-Animator*, the film directed by Stuart Gordon and based loosely on the writings of H. P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft would probably have hated the adaptation, but Gordon loved it. He had seen the film four times already, but gladly watched it again. He loved Jeffery Combs' antics as the mad doctor Herbert West. Even though the film was edited for content and chopped up with commercial interruptions, it helped pass the time, and momentarily at least, take his mind off of other, more unnatural, things. He rested on his unnassailed side, his head propped against his palm, and smiled like a foolish 12-year old. He was reminded of when as a boy he would sneak downstairs to watch the Late Night Creature Feature on Channel 7.

He was wearing a pair of headphones so as not to disturb Sebastian, who was in his own bed reading the latest Michael Brooks paperback. With the volume turned as loud as it would go and his attention so raptly focused on the very small screen, he didn't notice that Doctor King and Rebecca had come into the room until they had almost left. He was about to take the phones out of his ears when he realized they were there for Sebastian and Sebastian alone. Doctor King wore a grave expression and Rebecca, by his side, an upset one. Sensing she was being watched, she turned briefly to Gordon and tried to force a smile.

Gordon was tempted to remove the headphones, or at least turn down the volume on the set, to see what was going on. He decided against it, opting instead to give his roommate the privacy he deserved and looked like he needed. Plus, he didn't want to draw attention to himself and interrupt the flow of their conversation by either removing the phones or leaning far across the bed to manually turn the knob down on the pre-remote control era set. Instead, he kept his eyes, if not his full attention, on the movie, occasionally stealing furtive glances at the other side of the room.

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Eventually, Doctor King finished talking and gave Sebastian's injured right leg a good pat. He also changed the grave expression into a 'don't worry, everything's gonna be fine and dandy' one that looked, to Gordon at least, like complete and total bullshit. A moment later, he and Rebecca were walking out of the room, the later holding back tears. The doctor's artificial smile turned into a grimace he knew had nothing to do with the news he just had to deliver, but because the young intern was losing her composure in front of a patient. A gigantic No-No in Doctor King's Big Book of Medical Care.

Gordon decided to wait a few minutes until after they had exited the room (actually until the next commercial break) before removing the earphones and turning carefully in his bed to face his roommate. Sebastian looked as if he were dead already, staring at the wall, unblinking, unmoving, his skin drained of any color.

"Hey, Mr. Albert," Gordon said with trepidation, his voice low. "Is everything okay?"

It took Sebastian a half of a minute to respond. He turned his head slowly and attempted to smile. It was as false looking as Doctor King's had been. It took him another half of a minute before speaking a word.

"Hmm?" Oh, yes, everything's fine." He finally managed to say.

"Are you sure? You look upset."

Again, another half-minute delay as Sebastian struggled to form words into coherent sentences in his head.

"Oh, sure, it's nothing. You go back to watching your movie. I need to get some sleep."

"Okay." Gordon said. "But, Mr. Albert, if you need..."

"Goodnight, Gordon." Sebastian said, cutting him off. He picked up the Brooks book that had been lying facedown on his lap and closed it. Gordon noticed with dismay that he didn't bother to use a bookmark or dog-ear the page to remind him later where he had left off. It was as if he had no intention of ever picking the book up again. Slowly, his every move mechanical, he placed the book on



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the small bedside table, rolled over and went to sleep. Or at least pretended to sleep in order to avoid any further discussion.

Gordon resumed watching his movie, missing only a few minutes of the watered down, television version of the climax. After it was over, he watched the local news and the late night talk shows, falling asleep before Conan O'Brien's musical guests took the stage and filled the small screen.

Asleep with the headphones still in and the volume still up, he didn't hear the thing in the hospital hall as it slowly approached his room. He didn't see it as it stopped at the open doorway, pausing momentarily to sniff the air before moving on.

### 7

Gordon awoke the next morning to find himself alone in the room. All of Sebastian's personal belongings cluttering the small bedside table were gone. His reading glasses, the Michael Brooks paperback and the wristwatch that was his reward for 30 years of teaching were no longer competing for space with the tacky art-deco lamp there. His bed was made up with fresh linen and made to look as if it had never been slept in before. All traces of Sebastian Albert having ever existed were gone. Even the clipboard with his medical chart attached to the baseboard of the bed stood empty, awaiting the next unfortunate sap that found him or herself in the hospital.

Gordon's curiosity was peaked, as were both his concern and hope. Concern that bad things were happening to Sebastian somewhere else in the hospital and hope, albeit faint, that perhaps he had been discharged with a clean bill of health and a stern warning to stay off the water skis. The looks on both Doctor King's and Rebecca's faces the previous night strangled that hope before it could even get past being more than a fleeting thought.

At first, Gordon was able to believe Sebastian's tests had come back detailing something more than just a

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bum leg caused by a bad water skiing fall. That they had either moved him to a more appropriate wing of the hospital or into a private room so as to not have to share his grief and pain with a complete stranger seemed the most likely explanation. As the morning slowly crept into the afternoon, however, he couldn't stop himself from starting to think that Sebastian's sudden disappearance held far more sinister connotations. Although he had never actually seen anything, Gordon couldn't help but think it had something to do with the thing that roamed these halls at night.

By the time Rebecca came into his room a few hours later, Gordon was so caught in the grip of his own fantastical fervor he barely gave her a chance to say hello.

"Where's Sebastian? What have they done to him? What's going on around here?"

"Wait a second, hold on." Rebecca said calmly, sitting down on the end of his bed. "Everything's fine. Sebastian's just been moved to another room, that's all."

"Why? What for?"

"I don't really think that's any of your business." Rebecca said coldly. Putting up with Doctor King's bullshit was one thing, she was an intern and expected it, but there was no way she was going to take it from a patient, even if he was scared, alone and probably bored out of his mind. *He has to be*, Rebecca thought. *He's bored and he's playing a childish game of make believe to pass the time.*

"I think it is." Gordon said accusatorily. "I think something wrong is going on in this hospital and I think the doctors and the nurses are all in on it. I hoped you wouldn't be, but perhaps you are, too. Did you even bother to ask around about what was in the hallway the other night like you promised?"

"As a matter of fact, smartass, I did."

Gordon was immediately silenced, his antagonism killed by Rebecca's single, defiant statement. He had been prepared to continue; ready to accuse her of complicity in a conspiracy he hadn't even fully formulated, but now found himself unable to even speak. He savagely wanted to apologize or hide under his bed sheets until she left the

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room and their brief, but flared, exchange had been long forgotten. Rebecca continued to stare at him expectantly, however, making any such escape impossible. He had lost his edge but wasn't quite prepared to give up just yet.

"And?" He asked, trying to sound self-righteously indignant, but coming off more guilty and unsure of himself. "Did they take you seriously?"

"Oh, they took *me* seriously, all right. I told them I have a nutcase in my care up on the third floor seeing goblins in the night and he was wondering if they by any chance happened to know their names."

"I'm being serious."

"So am I." Rebecca said sternly. "I did ask around for you, like I promised I would, and I suppose that's my fault. People started looking at me as if I were the nutcase. I tried to do you a favor and I don't deserve this kind of attitude in return."

"You're right." Gordon said, barely speaking above a whisper. "I'm sorry."

"That's better." Rebecca said, her features softening somewhat. "I asked around to see if anyone had any stories to share since I'm still new and am curious about the place and its history. Except for an old nurse who swears to high heaven the ghost of a grieving mother haunts the Natal Infant Care Unit, they all had nothing to share. See? End of story. There's no creature that's stalking these halls at night."

"You don't believe me, do you?" Gordon asked, continuing before Rebecca even had a chance to answer. "Why did you bother asking if you didn't believe me?"

"Because I promised you I would and I never break my promises."

"You could have lied. You could have told me everything you just did without having actually asked anyone anything."

"I don't lie, either." Rebecca said, smiling. "I asked because I want you to know there's nothing amiss or extraordinary going on in this hospital. You were either just hearing commonplace things and your imagination got away from you or you're taking me for a ride."

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"I'm not. I promise." Gordon said. "I heard something. I almost saw something. And I swear to God it wasn't just a nurse doing her rounds."

"It was your first night here and you were scared, there's no shame in that. I know what kind of films you like. I like them too. Whatever you heard, your mind probably played a trick on you, making it sound like something out of a horror movie instead of the normal, everyday sounds of a hospital. That's all."

*Why do people always say that? Gordon thought. They never believe until it's always too late.*

"I don't think so." Gordon said, defensively. "I know there's more to it. Where's Sebastian?"

"Sebastian's sick, Gordon. Is that enough of a cover up for you?" Rebecca said sadly. "His tests came back and the doctor spotted an abnormality. He has bone marrow cancer. If he hadn't had the water skiing accident no one might have caught it until it was too late. All things considered, he's actually very lucky. We've moved him into a private room to prep him for emergency surgery. He's gonna lose his leg."

"My God." Gordon said. "I can't believe it. He didn't smoke. He looked healthy. He told me his family physician gave him a clean bill of health no more than six months ago."

"Bad things happen to good people, Gordon, and it's often unexpected."

"Did you personally see the tests that Doctor King performed? The ones that show the cancer?" Gordon asked doubtfully.

"No. Why?"

"Did anyone?"

"I'm sure Doctor King consulted with other physicians, yes."

"But you don't know that for sure. And he didn't consult with you." Gordon persisted.

"No, but why would he? I'm an intern, not an oncologist. He doesn't show me the film and test results of every patient who walks into the hospital."

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“I’m just curious.” Gordon said absentmindedly, already beginning to get lost in his own thoughts. His unformed theories were suddenly starting to take a sinister solidity. He only half-listened and partially participated as Rebecca finished the checkup. The fact that she left barely registered on him until she was gone from the room for more than 10 minutes. Yes, he was feeling better. No, he wasn’t in too much pain. Yes, there were still bubbles in the post-operative pump. No, he wouldn’t be going home just yet. The last part was fine with Gordon. He had too many questions that needed answering before he could leave.

First and foremost, what could Doctor King possibly want with Sebastian Albert’s leg?

### 8

Gordon’s bravado soon began to fade. It wasn’t due to any rising fear as night began to approach, but to the almost unbearable boredom that accompanied it. He tossed and turned in his bed, tried to have a nap and tried to watch some television. He couldn’t focus on anything but the night ahead and what it might hold. Even though he was so excited, or maybe because of it, by the time the late-shift nurse had come and gone, removing the tray with his uneaten supper and switching off the light as she left the room, he was exhausted. He felt like turning the television back on to help stay awake. He remembered falling asleep with it on just the night before so decided there was no point. Eventually, against his better attempts not to, he dozed off.

Three hours later, he awoke to more sounds coming from the hallway.

His initial reaction was one of annoyance at having had his slumber disturbed. After a second, however, he remembered where he was and what he had been waiting all day for. He snapped awake, sitting up in bed so quickly he accidentally tugged on the tube in his side, causing a stabbing pain to spread across his chest. Clenching his teeth, he tried to minimize the sound of his

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breathing as he once again strained his ears towards the door.

The sounds were not the same as before. There was no thump or scuttle. There was no wetness or ragged breathing. As he listened harder and the sound grew louder, the source disappointingly became clearer.

It was only a person walking down the hallway, whistling.

Leaning back in his bed, frowning, Gordon was about to curse himself for getting his hopes up for nothing when the orderly carrying the bag of slopping intestines walked by his door.

Gordon almost didn't believe what he saw. The orderly was visible for no more than a second, but the image was immediately seared onto his brain. The old man had been wearing a blood-soaked green smock and was whistling a happy tune. In his gnarled hand, he carried a clear plastic bag that looked like it weighed about 10 or 15 pounds. It was full of dark, glistening meat that Gordon instinctively knew belonged to a human being. The intestines were haphazardly coiled, and where he could see the ragged ends, knew that they had been hastily removed. Thick blood collected at the bottom of the bag and it sloshed back and forth, alternately pooling in opposite corners as the orderly happily swung it about as if he were carrying some random, innocuous item and not another human's insides.

The sound of the orderly vanished, leaving Gordon pale and trembling. He hesitated from pressing the page button hanging from the cord next to his bed out of fear that no one would believe him. They would think he had gone crazy and their first course of action would be to give him a sedative. Unable to stay awake, he would be at the mercy of whatever it was he had heard the other night. These fears soon gave way to common sense. If the orderly had felt comfortable enough to be so open, walking freely with no care of being discovered, then there was no one he could possibly tell who probably didn't know about it already. He had been right. They were all in on it together.

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Except, he hoped, for Rebecca.

As he sat trying to recall if there had been any reason to doubt Rebecca's sincerity that afternoon, playing their conversation over and over again in his mind, analyzing every word, body gesture and facial expression, the mental image of the orderly in the hallway soon began to fade and his previous exhaustion crept back up on him. Gordon came to the conclusion that, regardless of the risk involved, he would have to tell Rebecca about what he had seen. He had to tell someone.

With the decision made, he fell back asleep within the hour.

### 2

"She's gone."

"What?"

The nurse Gordon had taken to mentally referring to as Nurse Ratchet came into his room that afternoon in lieu of Rebecca. His resolve to inform Rebecca of the previous night's incident had not waned. If anything, it had intensified during the long morning as he anticipated seeing her during her afternoon rounds. Instead, however, he got the old, cantankerous nurse who had originally brought him into the room and arranged for the television service he now barely watched. In fact, when she had first walked into the room, he assumed it was to inquire if he would want the service extended for another two days. He asked about Rebecca immediately and was unable to keep the shock of hearing about her departure from his face.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Gordon asked.

"I mean what I said." Nurse Ratchet replied. "Miss O'Brien is no longer an employee of this hospital. Her internship was terminated this morning for reasons that were not made privy to me. And do you know why I was not made privy to them?"

"Why?" Gordon asked, his voice not much more than a croak.

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“Because the reasons for her dismissal are none of my business. Would you like to know something else, Mr. Murray?”

“They’re none of my business, either.” Gordon responded glumly, interpreting the sarcastic smile on Nurse Ratchet’s face accurately and answering appropriately.

“Now, let’s have a look at your side and be done with it.”

Nurse Ratchet was less than delicate inspecting and changing his dressings than Rebecca was, or a blind man with hooks for hands would be, either, but Gordon barely noticed. As she quickly removed the bandages, stretching and pinching his tender skin, he struggled with the ramifications of this new development. He was alone with no allies. Had Rebecca been fired because she asked questions for him and got too close to uncovering the truth? Had she been killed for it? Gordon doubted that the hospital staff would go to such drastic lengths to hide their secret, but seeing as how he didn’t know what that secret was he had no reason for guessing how far they would or wouldn’t go to protect it. Was he in any danger? If they knew Rebecca had been asking questions on his behalf, they also knew he suspected something was going on.

“Will you need the television for another two days?” Nurse Ratchet asked, her tending to his wound completed.

“What’s that?” Gordon replied, so lost in his own thoughts he barely heard her question.

“The TV.” Nurse Ratchet said, clearly irritated with having to repeat herself. “There’s still some leakage in your lung so you’re going to be here for a couple more days. Then they’ll decide if you need surgery or not. Would you like to keep the television up and running until then?”

It suddenly all came together for Gordon. The whole conspiracy. He mumbled his assent for the television and absentmindedly handed Nurse Ratchet a crumpled five-dollar bill. The bag of intestines. Sebastian’s missing leg. His potential date with the knife. The renewal of his cable service that reminded him of watching *Re-*



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*Animator* the other night. Like Jeffery Combs in Stewart Gordon's movie, Doctor King was trying to reanimate the dead. But, unlike Herbert West and his serum, he was following the more classic Mary Shelley method. He was taking parts of his patients and building his own post-modern Prometheus. As absurd as the idea sounded even to him, Gordon instinctively knew it had to be the truth. It was the horrid secret the hospital was trying to hide.

He was also sure that patients must have come and gone who never had to contribute to the creation of Doctor King's monstrosity. They were probably patients who had close relatives and other people in their lives that required telephone service to keep in touch with, providing updates on their condition or just friendly conversation to pass the time. Sebastian had a family, but maybe that leg of his was just too good for Doctor King to pass up. Now that Gordon had guessed the awful truth he could no longer count himself among the lucky number of those who made it out in one piece. They were going to be coming for him, or some *part* of him, and he would have to be prepared.

As soon as Nurse Ratchet left the room, he began to plan his escape.

### 10

For the rest of the day Gordon was on his best behavior so as not to arouse anyone's suspicion. He ate all of his lunch and supper, if one could call forcing the cold, spongy and God awful tasting food down his throat eating. He watched a bit of TV and even tried making small talk with Nurse Ratchet when she came in to give him his medication. She offered no more than the expected curt replies and left the room without closing the door behind her. As far as Gordon could tell, he was in the clear.

At 10 O'clock, she came again, offering more pills. At first, as if he thought he was in some kind of movie, Gordon contemplated pretending to swallow them and then hiding the evidence under the corner of his mattress. He took them, however, due to the pain that still hampered his side. The pills never made him sleepy, only

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slightly drowsy, and he would rather battle a slight case of fatigue than end up doubling over in agonizing pain as he tried to make his escape. He would be on the move in less than 20 minutes, after he was sure Nurse Ratchet had finished her rounds and moved on to the next floor.

When he was sure that the hall was clear, Gordon climbed out of bed as quickly as he could, making as little noise as possible. He had three hours before the nurse returned with more pain medication and he wanted to put as much distance between himself and the hospital in that time. Holding onto the post-operative pump awkwardly, he hobbled over to the small closet next to the bathroom and removed the clothes he had been wearing on the day he was admitted. Although having had worn them only a few days ago, and although it was his favorite shirt and pair of jeans, the clothing still felt oddly alien to him, as if they were from a different time, worn by a different person. A person who was possibly more innocent, but was probably just more naive.

He carefully slid into his jeans and put on his socks and sneakers while sitting on the edge of his bed. Due to the tube running out of his left side, he kept the hospital smock on and simply tied the shirt around his waist.

After dressing, he moved over to Sebastian's side of the room, thankfully still vacant, and removed the pillows from the bed. He then drew the partition around that bed so no passersby could see they had been pilfered. Then, in combination with his own, he placed the pillows into a form that vaguely resembled a human form and covered them with his sheets. *Now this is like a movie,* Gordon thought, admiring his handiwork. *There are too many references to choose from. Wait, Halloween II. That even took place in a hospital. It's perfect.*

Looking at his juvenile attempt at subterfuge, he knew it was less than perfect. It looked downright fake. But he was running out of time so it would have to do. It wouldn't hold up to any kind of close scrutiny, but would fool a quick glimpse from someone passing by in the hallway.

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The last thing Gordon had to do before making his getaway was to unplug the post-operative pump that was keeping his chest cavity free of any excess air. He had specifically saved this part until the very last minute. He didn't want to do it, but there was no other way as, unfortunately, the thing didn't run on batteries. Since he didn't have any scissors to cut the tube, he preferred unplugging the machine to tearing the tube out of his chest, even if that meant he had to take it with him. There were still bubbles in the water, but they were less frequent than when he had first been hooked to it. Holding his breath, he snatched at the power cord and quickly unplugged it from the wall socket as if he was tearing off an old band-aid. He waited, eyes closed, before attempting to take a short breath. The pain in his chest was still there, but it was manageable, and he silently applauded himself for having the foresight to not refuse Nurse Ratchet's pills.

Thinking of Nurse Ratchet and her inevitable return, he knew it was time to move.

The hallway was empty and quiet. Gordon stealthily crept out of his room and slowly made his way towards the end of the hall. If he remembered correctly from when they had brought him in, the elevators were located in the middle of a hallway two rights and his first left from where he stood.

Trying to look as relaxed as the orderly carrying the bag of human insides, but failing miserably, Gordon slowly walked down the hallway, attempting to conceal the pump beneath his green smock. The lights were too bright and the persistent buzz of the fluorescent tubes above was one of the few sounds in the otherwise quiet hallway masking his escape. The faint beeping of monitoring equipment or the muffled cough of a sick patient the only others. The relative silence made Gordon more and more positive that the amplified beating of his heart and his increasingly ragged breathing was going to betray him and give away his position.

He rounded the first right and quickly made his way to the second. Peeking around the corner to discern that the hallway was still empty, the exhilaration of being

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so close to his goal almost blocked out all fear and caution. He was tempted to just make a run for it. But he didn't, and as he took the hallway to his left, his heart and what meager breathing he could muster stopped altogether. He was even more thankful of his restraint than at having taken Nurse Ratchet's pain medication.

Directly across the hall from the two elevator doors was a receptionist's desk. Gordon didn't remember it being there because when he had been brought up to the third floor the nurse had wheeled him into the elevator facing forward. When they got off on this floor his back had been to the desk that now stood between him and freedom.

Behind the desk, Nurse Ratchet stared at a clipboard as coldly as she stared at everything else. In the chair next to her, an old, frail man with glasses almost the size of his whole face sat sleeping.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,* Gordon thought, his panic rising. *I'm so screwed. God, I swear to you, if you can get me out of this we're gonna be on talking terms 24/7 from now on, not just when I need your help.*

Gordon almost laughed out loud, blowing his cover and wasting the seemingly divine intervention as a call light suddenly illuminated above a patient's door directly behind him. Someone needed assistance, and after deciding to not disturb her companion's slumber, Nurse Ratchet came out from behind the receptionist's desk and walked towards the room, grumbling.

Gordon slipped into the blessedly unlocked utility closet next to where he had been standing in the hallway and left the door open a small crack to watch as she walked past. He waited a few seconds until he was sure that she must be in the patient's room and out of the hallway before opening the door as quietly as possible. Gordon dashed towards the elevators and was a second away from pressing the down button when two different things simultaneously caught his attention. The first was the thick puddle of sticky goo on the floor in front of the two large doors bearing a sign that read **NO ADMITTANCE! THIS DOOR TO BE LOCKED AT**

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**ALL TIMES!** and the second being the key that probably opened them resting in plain sight on the counter in front of the sleeping attendant.

*No, no, no, no, no, Gordon admonished himself. You've got a maximum of 10 seconds before Nurse Ratchet comes back and finds your dumb ass so get moving. Press the fucking down button.*

But he didn't. As much as he was trying to escape becoming a part of the monstrosity he knew must lay behind the locked doors, he would never forgive himself if he didn't at least try to catch a glimpse of the thing in the hospital hall. Thoughts of escape and safety battled with the hopes and desires of seeing that which he'd only ever beheld before in CGI or foam latex. The battle made him dangerously indecisive.

Hearing Nurse Ratchet's voice from down the hallway telling her patient unkindly to get back to sleep made up his mind. Ignoring the increasing pain in his side every time he took a breath, Gordon grabbed the keys from the counter, unlocked the door and quickly slipped beyond.

### 11

The scene on the other side of the door was so unlike Gordon's expectations that it left him somewhat disoriented. He had expected the hallway beyond to resemble something out of a psychopath's nightmare, or at least a really good B-movie. He had so wanted the fluorescents to be turned low, sporadic tubes flickering in and out of life. He wanted the floor to be littered with debris, possibly even a corpse or two, or at least some dusty bones. He wanted insects to be scurrying to and fro before the sudden intruder in their lair. He wanted cobwebs to fill the dark, shadowy corners. And blood. He had so expected there to be bucketfuls of blood splattered against the green walls. Not the cheesy bright red blood from a Hammer horror flick starring Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing, either. He wanted it to be thick and black, almost like oil, against the green.

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In actuality, the hallway looked exactly the same as it had on the other side of the locked barrier. The disappointment coupled with the increasing pain in his chest almost forced him to turn around and continue with his escape. But knowing Nurse Ratchet had no doubt returned to her station at the receptionist's desk left no option but to keep moving forward. That and the thick puddle of sticky goo had continued on this side of the door. As he looked at it more closely, he came to realize it for what it was – a trail. Like the slime left in the wake of a snail, the goo on the floor, if followed, would lead him directly to the thing.

Moving slowly, both for cautions sake and because the pain in his side was quickly becoming more unbearable, Gordon was forced to inch up the hallway, leaning on the wooden rail that ran its length for support. As he drew closer to its end, he began to hear strange noises. This part of the hospital was unoccupied so only the slight buzz of the overhead fluorescents competed with the new sounds he started to hear. The hallway turned left at the end, and by the time Gordon got there it was all he could hear.

There was a rustling as something was removed from a plastic bag. The sloppy sounds of many hungry mouths opening and closing. The same thump as before, only quicker this time, as if a large dog was happily wagging it's tail against the linoleum. And then the sound of eating, of teeth crunching bone and tearing flesh, of meaty morsels being swallowed by a multitude of throats. The most disturbing and perplexing sound was that of a familiar old man speaking as if addressing the family pet at dinnertime.

“There ya go, boy.” Slurp. Chew. Swallow. “That’s a good boy, eat it all up now.”

Gordon knew what he was going to see even before he poked his head around the corner. The foreknowledge still couldn't help his complexion from turning chalky white or the remnants of the horrible hospital food from rising in his throat.

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Only a few feet away, Doctor King was happily feeding the thing in the hospital hall. He smiled proudly as he pulled a red, stringy mess out of the plastic bag in his hands and dangled it over the creature's body. The thing was about the size of a John Deere riding mower. It didn't have a head or arms. It was one solid mass of slimy, peach colored fat. On closer inspection, what at first appeared to be many open sores all over it's form were in fact tiny mouths. There had to be at least two-dozen of them. Their opening and closing resembled the puckering of an asshole. They were straining towards the crimson mess in Doctor King's hand as baby birds would to the dangling worm from a mother's beak. Although not in as great a number as the clamoring orifices, eyeballs of differing shapes, sizes and color covered the monstrosity. There were noses, some of them only half-formed, as well. Hair protruded from the skin in sporadic patches, and like the eyes, was all different colors and textures. The thing achieved mobility by scuttling about like a centipede on a hundred human fingers, some of them still wearing rings and wedding bands, that grew out of it's underbelly. A three-pronged, four foot long tail dragged behind it's backside and was repeatedly thumping against the floor.

When Doctor King removed a severed hand from his grisly bag of treats, Gordon knew it was time to go. He had seen enough and couldn't give two shits if Nurse Ratchet tried to stop him at the receptionist's desk. He was getting on the elevator and getting the hell out of there no matter what.

Then his lung fully collapsed again, sending searing pain coursing through his body and causing an involuntary cry of pain that did not go unnoticed.

"What? Who's there?" Doctor King shouted, his playful smile turning into a scowl.

Gordon wanted to run but couldn't move. The pain was too excruciating and he couldn't even stand. He dropped the useless post-operative pump that he had kept hidden under his smock the whole time and fell with it to the cold floor.

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“Ah, Mr. Murray, fancy meeting you here.” Doctor King said, quickly evaluating the vulnerability and immobility of his unexpected and uninvited guest.

“Help me.” Gordon barely managed to whisper, clutching his side.

“Help you?” Doctor King said, laughing. “My dear boy, we were helping you. It appears, however, that you’ve foolishly gone and made things worse for yourself.”

“Please.” Gordon begged as the monster, curious, left Doctor King’s side and moved towards Gordon’s prone body. It sniffed the air with its many nostrils and from salivating mouths a number of green tongues began licking his body. The thing was panting happily. “Please, get it away from me.”

“Roger?” Doctor King asked, cheerfully amused.

“You... built this monster... and... named it Roger?”

“Built Roger? Heavens no. We found Roger years ago and have been his custodians ever since. Roger is something of a silly name, I know, but it was the name of the janitor who discovered him. Plus, Roger was the first person he ate.”

“You’re mad.” Gordon managed to say. “You’re a doctor. You’re supposed to help people, not feed them to this thing.”

“Oh, I am helping people, Mr. Murray.” Doctor King said seriously. “Make no mistake about that.”

“What about Sebastian?”

“Mr. Albert has cancer. He had to lose the leg anyways. Could you imagine what would happen if Roger here had to leave the hospital to find food? There would be a lot of missing pets at first. And then unattended children would disappear, I assure you. And that would only be the beginning. We at the hospital are performing a valuable public service that not many people can perform. That’s why we have to keep our staff around as long as possible, which I’m sure you’ve no doubt noticed. It’s so hard finding acceptable replacements, nowadays.”

“Rebecca.” Gordon muttered.



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“Oh, don’t worry. Miss O’Brien didn’t become Roger’s lunch. I believe she’s working at a family clinic somewhere downtown. She just wasn’t working out. Made a lousy candidate. But you, Mr. Murray, you on the other hand will most definitely get your chance to help us.”

“What... what are you talking about?” Gordon whispered. The pain in his side was so unbearable he could hardly breathe and was starting to see stars.

However, his vision was not so clouded that he didn’t see Doctor King remove a syringe from his coat pocket nor the pain too intense to not feel it as it was driven into his thigh.

And then there was only darkness.

### 12

Gordon awoke an indeterminate amount of time later. He was sore and confused and wondered why he had awoken before his alarm had gone off again. That memory jogged a series of horrific others and he suddenly remembered he was in the hospital. Their blurry forms slowly taking shape, the sight of Doctor King and Nurse Ratchet standing at the foot of his bed, smiling like two ghouls, confirmed the fact. Gordon’s first thought was that he was in grave danger and his first impulse was to run. He bolted upright in bed and was surprised to find that he was in no way restrained.

“Take it easy now, Mr. Murray.” Doctor King said in a voice oozing with false concern. “You’ve just come out of surgery and you’re going to have to take it easy for a while.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Gordon almost screamed, breaking out into a heavy sweat. “Where’s Roger?”

“Who’s Roger?” Nurse Ratchet asked, her ignorance coming off a hundred times more convincingly than Doctor King’s concern.

“You know what I’m talking about!” Gordon shouted. “It’s the monster you’ve been keeping hidden and feeding!”

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Doctor King and Nurse Ratchet regarded each other with confused, yet amused, expressions.

“My word, Mr. Murray, you do have a vivid imagination, don’t you?” Doctor King said, smiling. “I assure you there is no monster in this hospital. I’m afraid that the combination of drugs, the trauma of last night and your love of horror movies and such has left you a little bit confused.”

“You’re lying. I saw you feeding it with my own eyes.”

“That’s the kind of nonsense he was mumbling when I found him, doctor.”

“I see.” Doctor King replied, mentally assessing the situation. “Mr. Murray, for reasons unknown to us, you left your room last night and to do so unplugged the pump that was helping to keep your lung inflated. After a period of time, your lung collapsed again and we were forced to perform emergency surgery. It’s a good thing the nurse found you when she did. The stress of a pneumo thorax can put extreme pressure on the heart and can possibly be a fatal experience if not tended to immediately.”

“That’s bullshit. I saw you feeding it....” Gordon began saying before trailing off. “What kind of surgery did you perform on me?”

“We had to remove your lung, I’m afraid.” Doctor King said. “But don’t worry, you’re fine now and well on the way to a full recovery. In the meantime, I suggest you rest. I suggest you give that overactive imagination of yours a rest as well.”

Shaking their heads in bemusement, Doctor King and Nurse Ratchet left the room, leaving Gordon alone with his confused thoughts.

*What the hell is going on? I didn’t imagine all of what I saw, I’m sure of it.*

But he wasn’t. Not as sure as he had been upon awakening. There were just too many questions. If he had seen something, why was he still alive? If they were waiting to deal with him later, why wasn’t he in restraints? Is it possible that, like everyone seemed to think, he had made the whole thing up? Gordon Murray had no answers to

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any of these questions. But, in the end, he didn't need any. In the end, there was only one question that mattered to him above all others.

He couldn't help but wonder what human lung tasted like and if the thing in the hospital hall would be craving a second midnight snack.

**THE END**

## **Tale #2**

### **Payoffs**

The first thing Joey did when he entered the pawnshop was to turn the OPEN sign around so the world passing by the front door would see CLOSED. He didn't expect things to take too long with the old man, but he didn't want any interruptions, either. He picked up a dusty old guitar and absentmindedly started strumming the remaining strings. The twang they made startled the old man who had been asleep behind the counter, his head resting on an open newspaper. Joey chuckled to himself as he noticed the faded newsprint had stained the upper portion of the old man's forehead. If he looked hard enough he could almost make out the headline.

"Huh? Who's there?" The old man said, startled.

"It's me, Barney. Your Uncle Joey."

The confused features of Barney's old, wrinkled face quickly gave way to frightened ones. The man in his shop wasn't a customer. Seeing as how he was at least four decades younger than the shopkeeper, he obviously wasn't his uncle, either.

"Your Uncle Sal is looking for his money, old man." Joey said, setting aside the guitar and picking up a small, brass handled container about the size of a cigar box. "Why don't you tell your Uncle Joey what the hold up is all about?"

Why did they always have to say they were his uncle?

"Listen, it's like I told that other hooligan who came in here last week..." Barney began, raising his hands as if trying to calm Joey down even though Joey hadn't made any threatening moves towards him. Not yet, anyway.

"Who you callin' a hooligan, pops? You think I'm a hooligan, do ya? I'm just tryin' to make a livin, Barney, and old farts like you are making that harder and harder for me to do nowadays. Makes guys, hooligans, like me get

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a bit upset. You wanna see what happens when I get a bit upset, do you?”

And why did they always try to make you feel as if you were at fault?

“Listen, I’m sorry, but the last fellow who...”

“Say,” Joey said, still holding onto the small container, a fact that Barney hadn’t failed to notice. They always came across it sooner or later, the hooligan bastards. That’s why he left it out. He felt guilty about doing so, but not guilty enough to start keeping it out of sight in the back storeroom. “You talking ‘bout Uncle Bobby? Is he the hooligan who was in here last week?”

“Yes, Robert, that was his name. He came in here demanding money just as you are. I told him...”

“Funny thing ‘bout that, Barney. The boss ain’t heard from Uncle Bobby in about a week now. We was startin’ to think maybe he’d been pinched by the coppers or maybe even whacked. Our line a’ work, ya always gotta keep an eye out for coppers and bein’ whacked. Then we got to thinkin’, maybe he took the boss’ money and decided to skip town. You wouldn’t happen to know where he is now, would ya, Barnes?”

“Listen to me,” Barney said, the sweat coating his brow starting to blur the newsprint tattoo. “I have no idea what happened to Bobby Zucco. He came in here last week demanding Sal’s protection money...”

“It’s a neighborhood insurance policy, Barney, not no protection monies.” Joey said, cutting the old man off. “It’s a pretty rough part a town ya live in. I’d be thankful that somebody like Uncle Sal would be willing to look after an old bat like you. For a small fee, of course.”

Extortion in the guise of protection. The only protection he needed was from Soprano wannabes like Boss Sal and all of the other uncles.

“Either way,” Barney continued, “Bobby came in and I...”

“Hey, nows that ya mention it, lots of people been getting pinched or whacked after they collect in this here part a town. Uncle Bobby ain’t the first. You wanna tell me something ‘bout that too, old man?”

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“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Bobby and the others, Phil Risotto and Christopher Bisanti, came by collecting for Boss Sal and I didn’t have the money they were looking for. I offered them something else in return. A gift they could give Sal in lieu of the money I owe him. They accepted the offer and left, I swear to you on my mother’s grave!”

“Really?” Joey said, pulling a gun from the waistband of his pants, but keeping the piece at his side, just wanting Barney to know it was there. “You willin’ to swear on yer grave, old man?”

“I swear. I gave them a gift for Sal and they accepted it and left.”

“You made them an offer they couldn’t refuse, eh? Ha ha ha. So, what was it, pops? Jewellery? Antiques? It musta been something around here that I ain’t seen yet cause let’s face it, all of this other stuff is shit.”

“Actually,” Barney said, his voice faltering as he raised a trembling finger and pointed at the box in Joey’s hand. “What I offered is in that box right there.”

“This box?” Joey said, raising it up for a closer look. His reaction was that of both disbelief and greed. “You offered those guys this box and they agreed to it? This small thing instead of the 5 g’s you owe your Uncle Sal?”

“Yes. I offered it to them and they accepted. What’s in that box is worth more than 5 thousand, easy. All of the men left promising to give it to Sal personally. Unopened. It is a gift for Sal and Sal only. No one else. I suppose the fools got greedy and looked inside, and well...”

This time Barney’s voice just trailed off instead of being interrupted yet again. The old man was at a loss for words, but Joey barely noticed. He was busy inspecting the small, brass-handled box in his hand, trying to figure out what was inside and if it really could be worth more than 5 thousand dollars.

“So,” He said, barely looking at Barney when he finally spoke, never taking his eyes from the box. “If you gave it to them knuckleheads, how’d it get back here

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without you knowing what happened to them? Or is this jus' another one? You got a dozen boxes like this here one lyin' all over the place or what?"

"No, that's the only one. I'm not sure what happened to your... associates. I make the offer, they accept and then, the next day, I find the box back on my step. I don't know how it makes its way back here. But I do know it never reaches Boss Sal unopened."

If only there was such a thing as honor amongst thieves. All of Barney's problems would have been over the first time one of these assholes took the box and gave it to Sal while it was still hungry.

"I've heard some funny people tell some strange things in order to avoid my breaking their legs, pops, but this is the best. In fact, I like it so much I'm gonna make you an offer." And as if to prove his point, Joey tucked the gun back into the waistband of his pants. "I'll take this here box to the boss and see what he has to say. If he's okay with the deal, we're square. If not, I'll be back tomorrow looking for at least seven and a half, ya got me? And I'll be bringin' along my lucky bat as well so you best be ready. I know yer thinkin', why a bat when he's got a gun? Because bats take longer and I have more fun with them, kapeesh?"

"Okay, but you've got to promise me that you won't open the box under any circumstances! It is to be opened by Boss Sal only, do you understand?"

"You ain't in no position to be givin' the orders around here, old man. If the boss don't like what he sees, you best be ready to make with the cash tomorrow or a couple of broken legs will only be the beginning of what I'm gonna be doing with my lucky bat. You better not be makin' me come round a second time, do you understand me?"

Barney nodded his head in agreement and Joey left the store, the small, brass-handled box in the pocket of his overcoat. Sadly, Barney already knew the item would never make it to Boss Sal. He had seen the look of greed in Joey's eyes when he handled the box. It was the same look that had been in the eyes of all the others. Sal really needed

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to hire goons who were far less greedy and much more loyal.

The following morning, Barney arrived at the pawnshop to find the familiar box sitting on his stoop. He sighed warily as he hunched over and hesitantly picked it up. With a reverence reserved only for the most ancient and holy of artifacts, he set it back on the shelf next to a wind-up toy monkey and a dust covered classic Coca-Cola bottle from the 1960s. He wanted to make sure it was left in plain sight for the next thug Boss Sal decided to send over.

As he flipped the CLOSED sign to read OPEN, he heard the muffled belch coming from the thing inside the box and sighed again.

This could go on forever.

Thank God the thing in the box was insatiable.



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# The Third Floor

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*For Stephen King*

Wesley Madigan hated his job. He hated it with a passion.

“I’m telling ya, Christina’s a dyke, man.” He said one day while emptying the garbage on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor of a large office sky rise downtown. “I bet the bitch eats more pussy than you do, Andre. It’s the only explanation.”

Although he had no proof, he was positive that McDonald Staffing and his recruiter, Christina, no longer considered him for anything but shit jobs. He, on the other hand, wanted a career. He wanted to make obscene amounts of money. He wanted to live in a condo and drive a Beemer. Play golf on the weekends and stay at a cottage in the summer. And of course he wanted a lot of pussy. About as much pussy as Christina did if she wasn’t interested in him.

Wesley took the first general labor contract they offered, a weeklong job with a site cleanup crew, because the rent was due and he needed to make some quick cash. It was the hardest job he ever did for the least amount of money. The rent for his cramped bachelor apartment covered for yet another month, he passed on the next similar contract, opting instead to wait for the great opportunity the agency had promised would come along. When it didn’t and a transit pass was required, he accepted the three-day gig demolishing a townhouse basement where mold had gotten into the walls. Utilities and groceries forced him to take the job at the hospital cleaning up after the men restoring the children’s wing on the eighth floor, and as that job ran long, he stayed until its completion because the rent had rolled around once again.

When his file had been taken over by a new recruiter named Christina, he hoped she would take him more seriously than her predecessor had. He also wanted to bed her more than any other woman he’d ever met in his life. Perhaps the desire was psychological - her being in a position of power over him, holding his future career in her hands and all that garbage. More than likely, however, it was the short, tight skirts she wore and her 34DD chest.

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The first time he met her he had brought along a revised copy of his resume and a determination not to leave with anything less than a clerical job to start the following Monday.

He left agreeing to a janitorial contract at the sky rise downtown instead. He was wondering how his resolve had weakened so quickly when the mental image of Christina's chest in her tight top returned and clarified everything. It had been *very* cold in the office that day.

Now, three months later, Wesley was still emptying wastebaskets, vacuuming floors and restocking rolls of toilet paper at the same sky rise downtown. Every time he questioned Christina as to when she would be able to find him a job better suited to his qualifications, she batted her eyelashes, smiled and leaned forward to offer a better view of her ample cleavage and he would forget the promise he had made to himself to retract his services if she jerked him around yet again (unless it was in the way he had so often fantasized, that was).

"Nothing this week, Wes. Maybe something will pop up during the next fiscal quarter. In the meantime, your current position has been extended for another three months. Congratulations!"

If it weren't for the something else *popping up* in his trousers every time he met with her, Wesley would have told her off then and there. She was, after all, withholding two of his greatest desires – a better job and a night of selfish passion with her in the sack. To fully comprehend how much he hated his job, the desires came in that order, regardless of how fantastic those tits were.

"I mean," Wesley continued saying to Andre as he set down the empty wastebasket and picked up another full one. "I have a degree for Christ's sake. I should be working with these guys instead of picking up after them."

"Whatever, man." Andre, clad in the same dingy overalls and subjected to the same mind-numbingly boring job as Wesley, said. He had long ago grown accustomed to Wesley's seemingly never ending stream of complaints. "The guys who work here are a bunch of pricks. Rich,

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snobby bastards. You wouldn't want to be like them. You know what I'm saying?"

Even though in total disagreement, Wesley conceded. As much as he disliked and tried to distance himself as far as possible from Andre and the rest of his ilk, he still had to work with them. If there was one avenue left in which his life could get any worse, being ostracized by the other grunts would be it. No matter how bitter he had become, he had no inclination to add loneliness to his long list of grievances as well. Who else would he go for pints at O'Malley's Pub with after quitting time if not his fellow slaves?

"Okay," Wesley said, wheeling the large plastic refuse bin towards the service elevator. "I'm taking this down to the basement and then going for a smoke."

"Sounds good," Andre said. "I'll meet you on the 15<sup>th</sup>."

Wesley left the office, pushing the bin towards the elevators down the hall, mumbling as he went. Fantasies of a better life ran through his mind. He pressed the DOWN button and waited patiently for the carriage to arrive and the doors to open. It did and he entered, pressing the button for the basement. The numerical display screen began to flash down from 14, accompanied by a robotic voice sounding off the floors for the hearing impaired. The car came to a stop on the third floor and the doors opened with a soft DING. The hallway beyond was empty. Assuming the person got bored waiting for the elevator and decided to take the stairs, Wesley innocently and inaccurately assumed that the car had stopped for that reason alone. He waited for the doors to automatically close, but after remaining open for a whole minute, he began to wonder. Moving from behind the garbage bin to the control panel, he pressed the DOORS CLOSED button, but nothing happened.

"Piece of shit." He said, repeatedly pressing the aforementioned button and continuously getting the same results. Wasn't that the clinical definition of insanity?

After another minute of inactivity, he stepped out of the elevator and onto the third floor. It was completely

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deserted. The company that had occupied the offices here went bankrupt three months before and no one had yet picked up the lease. Wesley knew this because, for the time being, it meant a whole floor of wastebaskets he didn't have to worry about emptying and carpets that didn't require vacuuming.

"Hello?" He asked the emptiness. For some reason, the deserted floor had started to freak him out. He was answered by silence and quickly climbed back into the elevator.

And gasped.

For a split second he had the impression that there was a figure standing in the elevator with him, just behind the garbage bin. The figure wasn't distinct, more of a soft luminescence in the vague shape of a human being. Wesley moved back slightly, more startled than he'd ever publicly admit to, and the shape distorted and disappeared.

"Jesus." He said to himself, shaking his head foolishly. *It was my own damn reflection*, he thought. *God, I need that smoke*. For some reason he didn't question why, if it was his own reflection, he could no longer see it.

Looking up at the numerical display screen, Wesley watched as the number 3 was replaced by the following words:

### **Need Assistance?**

"Duh." Wesley said, forcing bravado. He still felt somewhat uneasy by the deserted floor and his transitory reflection.

### **Please Pick Up Receiver Below.**

Just below the display screen and above the controls for the buildings 22 floors was another panel. A picture of a phone had once been present, but the sticker had long ago been picked away by bored travelers. A small, rounded indentation just big enough to fit the tip of an index finger in was located along the right side and was the only visible indication the panel existed along the smooth, reflective surface of the elevator wall. As he reached out to open it, Wesley was surprised to find his hand shaking. He tried to chalk it up to nicotine withdrawal, but failed to fool even himself. He was nervous. *Of what?* He thought,

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frowning. *Of a Goddamn phone? Open the panel, you pussy.* He did and a thin film of sweat broke out across his brow. Until the panel revealed the red emergency phone behind it, he had held his breath expectantly.

Upon seeing the receiver, he exhaled slowly. Everything appeared to be as it should. Just as soon as he started to relax, however, the phone rang shrilly and he jumped, emitting a shrill shriek of his own.

"Jesus!" He said in a high, squeaky voice. He steadied his nerves before picking the phone up to speak to whoever was on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" He said, his voice still somewhat shaky.

"Hello." The voice responded.

Although he had been expecting to speak to a person, Wesley discovered the voice was the same digitized one announcing the passage of floors. He was almost as unnerved speaking to the computer as he was by the deserted third floor.

"How may I be of assistance to you today?"

"Um," Wesley began. "Is there an actual person I can talk to? Like an operator or something? A technician?"

"I am a person, sir. How may I help you?"

Even though the voice claimed to be coming from a real person, Wesley couldn't help but think of HAL, the malicious computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was talking to a machine. Still, he needed help and saw no other options. Before he could respond, the voice resumed.

"How may I help you today, Wesley?"

"How do you know my name?"

"I have complete files with photo identification on all of the buildings maintenance staff. I'm looking at you right now. See the top, upper left corner of the car?"

Wesley looked, and through a small grate, could see the glowing red dot and lens of a CCTV camera. He couldn't help growing self-conscious under its watchful stare and mentally began scrolling through all of the things that could have been captured on camera, from the picking of his nose to the stealing of office supplies.

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“The camera was installed to keep an eye on the maintenance crew and delivery persons who come in and out of the building on a regular basis. Don’t worry. They aren’t interested in any of your petty indiscretions. Yet. They’re more interested in building a case against your co-worker, Andre. He stole four computers last week.”

Wesley breathed a sigh of relief. He had been stealing odds and ends – staplers, hole punchers and printer paper – almost since he started working there. Not because he needed the stuff, but to stick it to ‘the man’. Even though he resented the higher ups, he had no intention of telling Andre Big Brother was watching. If it kept their attention away from his own thievery he wasn’t about to spoil it.

“Hey, thanks for the warning.” Wesley said, shooting a ‘thumbs up’ at the camera mounted in the ceiling and smiling a goofy smile. In the past few minutes, he had become more comfortable with the voice, and although still sounding digitized, it was slowly taking on the identity of a ‘him’ instead of an ‘it’ in his mind. He could almost see the man holed up somewhere in the building surrounded by a bank of television monitors keeping a watchful eye over everything. He probably hated his job as much as Wesley hated his.

“So,” The voice said. “How may I help you today?”

“Well, for starters, you can get me a better job.” Wesley joked.

“Granted.” The voice responded coldly.

And just like that, the elevator doors closed and the car began to work again. Instead of continuing on its original descent to the basement, it started to ascend.

FOUR. FIVE. SIX. SEVEN. EIGHT. The now familiar voice intoned from the small speaker box just below the display screen flashing the corresponding numerals.

“What the hell?” Wesley said, pressing the STOP and BASEMENT buttons repeatedly. Nothing happened. The car only came to a stop when it reached the 19<sup>th</sup> floor.



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Confused, Wesley stepped out of the car and into the bustling hallway. The 19<sup>th</sup> floor was home to Bachman and Stark Law, one of the most prestigious law firms in the city. The elevator doors began to close behind him and he was two seconds too late to climb back into the now descending carriage. Muttering obscenities under his breath, he reached out to call it back, but froze, his finger an inch away from the DOWN button. The cuff of his shirtsleeve was no longer the frayed, faded blue cotton of the mandatory work overalls. It was now the fine fabric of a very expensive suit. A gold cufflink glimmered in the light cast from the overhead fluorescents.

“What the hell?” He said again, looking down at himself. A three-piece Armani suit had replaced his work clothes. It was black with matching dress pants, a crisp, white dress shirt and a blazing red tie that probably cost more than the entirety of his wardrobe at home.

“Hey, Wesley, how’s the Caferty file coming along?” A man approaching him asked. “Still kicking your ass?”

“Nope.” Wesley replied, absolutely flabbergasted that he not only knew the man speaking to him, but that he understood the obscure question as well. At the firm, a ‘Caferty file’ referred to a very difficult case, named after the cantankerous CNN personality on *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*. “I found a loophole this morning. I think we can use it to our advantage and get a lot of leverage against their client.”

“Excellent.” The man, whom Wesley knew was Dean Headley, said. However inexplicably, Wesley also knew Dean had a wife, three kids and two mistresses on the side. He gave Wesley a high five and a sly wink. “We should do O’Malley’s. You know, to celebrate?”

“I’m in.” Wesley said, smiling.

“Primo.” Dean replied, flashing a million-dollar grin. “I’ll see you there.”

“Count on it.”

*Oh my God*, Wesley thought as Dean walked away. *What the hell is going on here? Have I had a stroke or something?* He felt a strange sense of disassociation, but not complete

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disorientation. He knew intuitively that his office was down the hall, three doors on the left. Even though he'd never actually stepped foot in it, he knew he'd been working at the firm for six years now and was rising so fast in the eyes of the old man who ran the joint that he had a decent shot of making partner before his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday. He knew the old man loved fishing. And even though Wesley hated it, he still spent a few hours every weekend watching fishing shows to learn the lingo and further ingratiate himself in the old man's good graces. That he knew he had actually spent the weekend watching football and surfing Internet porn instead offered only the most minimal mental conflict. Instead of discovering legal loopholes this morning he had really been scrubbing toilets. Instead of having drinks with Andre and his coworkers he would be having them with Dean and his colleagues like he always did.

The two distinct sets of memories for the past six years, for some reason, didn't drive him absolutely insane. Even though he should be suffering all the affects of severe schizophrenia, he only had a minor, tolerable headache. He knew that the recollections of his time at Bachman and Stark Law were fabrications, but for some reason the rest of the world saw it as fact. Andre and the others wouldn't know him to piss on him and the people on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor envied his condo, the Beemer in the driveway and the cottage on the lake. Although he could still remember him, the Wesley Madigan who woke up that morning no longer existed. The only thing he didn't know was how the fuck any of it happened.

Wesley turned, not wanting anyone to see the look of dumbstruck confusion on his face, and pressed the DOWN button on the elevator again. He needed to get outside. He needed fresh air. He needed that smoke he knew he told Andre he was going to take 30 minutes ago. Even though, in this brave new world, 30 minutes ago he had actually been figuring out a way to get a CEO off the hook for manipulating the company numbers. The loophole he had told Dean about.

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As he waited for the elevator, Wesley came to the realization that his wish had come true. It was as if he had rubbed a dusty old lamp and made the request of an ancient genie. He remembered the conversation with the digitized, disembodied voice in the elevator and how, when it asked if it could be of assistance, he had jokingly asked for a better job. Then everything changed.

*Holy shit! He thought. I've discovered a Goddamn enchanted elevator!*

As if answering the summons, the doors opened before him with a soft DING and Wesley entered, hurriedly pressing the button for the third floor. He remained facing the front and didn't see the glowing, spectral form that had startled him so much before at his back. He didn't notice how it had become more distinct, and instead of appearing as a reflection along the smooth surface of the wall, now seemed just behind it, as if on the other side of a carnival funhouse mirror. This time, it didn't disappear.

The digitized voice sounded more human and Wesley found it eerily familiar. In his exuberance at the miraculous discovery, he didn't bother to think where he might have heard it before. Instead of announcing '3' when the elevator came to a stop, the voice, issuing from the speaker box and not the telephone as it had before, greeted him instead.

"Hello, Wesley." It said. "How may I be of assistance?"

"Tell me I'm not dreaming." Wesley said, speaking quickly. "That wasn't a wish or anything, okay? Just a rhetorical question. I've seen enough movies and TV shows to know you've got to be very careful when dealing with a genie. You are a genie, right? Again, just looking for information. That wasn't a wish or anything."

"Don't worry, Wesley. I know the difference between a wish and an inquiry. A deep, passionate desire lies behind every wish. A passing interest only behind every inquiry. I'll know when you're asking for something you truly want. To answer your question, yes, I am a genie. A Djinn, actually."

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“Holy shit.” Wesley said, almost more to himself than the elevator. “You’re like trapped in here, right?”

“For the time being, yes.”

“Great. Well, not great for you, but you know what I mean.” Wesley said, not really caring if the genie had been trapped for a few weeks or a few centuries. But he doubted the latter as the elevator and the building was relatively modern. Mid 80’s at the latest. He also didn’t care if it remained trapped for another thousand years as long as it granted his wishes. “So, does this work like it does in all of the stories?”

“More or less.”

“I get three wishes then, right?”

“That’s right.” The voice said as patiently as if it were a retail salesperson waiting for a customer to make up their mind over some frivolous item.

“And I can’t do anything like wish for infinite wishes, can I?”

“No, that would be stupid. I’d never get out of here if that were the case. Besides, the power that allows me to fulfill the wish is the corresponding desire behind it. If you could have everything you ever wanted, how could you ever truly desire anything? Three wishes. The rules on that are very clear.”

“Okay.” Wesley said, disappointed even though he knew all along that would be the genie’s answer. “I guess with the new job I’m down to two wishes.”

“Correct.”

“Even though I hadn’t known at the time I was making a wish?”

“That’s right. This isn’t some case you’re working on, Wesley. There are no magical loopholes to be found. Besides, even if I was to retract the wish and return you to your much despised blue collar existence, wouldn’t it be the first thing you’d ask for anyway?”

“I suppose so.” Wesley said, frowning. “These wishes aren’t going to backfire on me, are they? You know, in a cruel and ironic way? I wish for good pussy and I get a loving, devoted cat or something?”

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“I’ll give you only what you ask for, Wesley. I’ll feed the desire that fuels the wish. No cheap tricks or parlor theatrics, I promise. Listen to your heart. Take your time. Don’t think. Just desire. I’ll make it happen.”

As if following a sage master’s advice, Wesley didn’t think. He yearned, and almost instantaneously, knew what he wanted. He hadn’t been listening to his heart, but his groin.

“Christina.” He said, holding his breath as he awaited the genie’s response, fearing the object of his lecherous affection would be denied him.

“Granted.” The voice said.

The elevator came to life and descended to the main floor. The doors opened onto the lobby and the grinning face of Dean Headley, not Christina, greeted him.

“Hey buddy, let’s go get pissed.” He said.

O’Malley’s Pub was packed. Most everyone who worked in the area frequented the establishment after work and it was often impossible to find a seat. Although people from all walks of life went there, social segregation still existed and they often grouped themselves among others of the same class. The working class settled into the chairs and tables next to the kitchen while the wealthier gathered in the more secluded, quiet and plush section behind the centrally located bar. Wesley had sat with Andre and his former maintenance brethren in that aroma of fried food many times before, but today, and as far as anyone else was concerned as always, when he and Dean entered they bypassed that area without giving it a second thought. They moved behind the bar and took their usual seat at a booth already occupied by two of their colleagues - Hawthorne and Jenkins. Within moments an attractive waitress strolled over to take their order and instead of his usual pitcher, Wesley asked for a gin and tonic, the words falling off his tongue as familiarly as Budweiser normally did.

“Coming right up, Mr. Madigan.” The waitress said, offering him a wink and a seductive smile. Her name

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was Shirley and she had served him many times in the past without ever recalling his name before. He wasn't surprised to discover that she knew it now. He was taken slightly aback by her flirtations however and watched intently as she slid the ordering pad into the pocket of the apron tied around her slim waist.

"So," Hawthorne said, setting his drink down. "I got the instant message. What are we celebrating?"

"Wesley's figured out a way around the Caferty file." Dean said.

"No shit?" Jenkins asked, a little jealous yet obviously impressed. "The old man's gonna cream his jeans."

"Well," Wesley said, reveling in the spotlight but choosing to play it modestly. "Let's keep this to ourselves for the time being. It's not the most legal of loopholes, if you follow me."

"Hey," Dean said, slapping Wesley on the back. "When have lawyers ever cared about the law, anyway?"

Shirley returned with the drinks and threw Wesley another glance as she set the glasses on the table. In the same way that he recalled his previous life as a blue-collar schmuck, memories of late night stroke sessions to cable pornography began to compete with the new reality of being in a three-month long relationship with Christina. The new memories included a fantastic sex life, but the true knowledge that it had always been difficult for him to get laid made the low cut shirt and tight mini-skirt worn by Shirley all the more difficult to ignore, even if he was happily tied down. He was not used to being flirted with and enjoyed her advances. They did not go unnoticed by the other people at his table, either.

"Looks like someone else wants to help Wesley celebrate." Hawthorne said after Shirley left.

"She's just looking for a larger tip, that's all." Wesley said, blushing.

"Who cares?" Dean said. "You can be tapping that ass in a minute and you know it. That's worth tipping over 15%."

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“He wouldn’t do that.” Jenkins said, smiling foolishly. “You wouldn’t ditch us, would ya, Wes? Bros before Hoes, right? Ha Ha.”

“What about Christina?” Wesley said, ignoring Jenkins and addressing Dean, as if his being in a relationship would matter at all to a man cheating on his wife with two other women.

“What about her?” Dean asked, honestly confused. He could always be counted on to give that final nudge in the wrong, however pleasurable, direction. “I’ve banged half of the waitresses in this joint and most of those while I’ve been married, for crissakes. Married or not, I love to fuck. I’d even fuck a fat chick as long as she had fat chick tits. There’s no point in screwing a tubby if she doesn’t have it going on upstairs. I wouldn’t order an extra large pizza and not get extra toppings, you know what I’m saying?”

Blue or white-collar, when it came to conversations about women, some men rarely differed. Regardless of the vast discrepancies in their salaries, and especially in groups, men could certainly become bona fide assholes. Wesley couldn’t stop himself from laughing a little too loud and long. He recalled many similar conversations with Andre held not too long ago. They were held in the same pub, but in a different life.

“What’s so funny?” Jenkins asked, somewhat confused by Wesley’s overabundance of mirth.

“Nothing.” Wesley said, wiping away a tear that had formed at the corner of his eye. “Just remembering a conversation with an old friend of mine.”

“Who’s that?”

“Nobody you’d know.” Wesley said, knowing full well that Andre had emptied Jenkins wastebasket every day for the past two years.

Although it could just be the alcohol, the awareness of having lived two lives continued to make Wesley’s head spin. It was manageable, but knowing that Andre would have no recollection of ever talking to Wesley was still taking some getting used to. In the same way that Jenkins would never deign to acknowledge Andre,

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Andre would never lower himself to piss on the new Wesley or any of his friends even if 10-foot flames were shooting out of their ears.

“Anyway,” Dean continued, slightly annoyed at the intrusion on his adulterous diatribe. “You should at least go and find out what time she gets off. Or at least get her number for crying out loud. Don’t let us down.”

“You really think so?” Wesley asked, wavering on the fence of commitment and cheating.

“If you don’t, I will.” He answered.

“Okay, I’ll do it.” Wesley said, standing with a newfound confidence. “If only to avoid your sloppy seconds.”

The table erupted in misogynistic laughter and his colleagues applauded as he slid out of the booth and strutted toward Shirley. She stood by the register, and although she had finished punching in a customer’s total, lingered. She had spotted Wesley approaching out of the corner of her eye. As far as she was concerned, he was a loser, but he was a loser with a lot of cash. If banging him for a few weeks led to a slew of nice and expensive gifts, it would be worth it.

Wesley, a few feet away, was suddenly confused. He recalled cheating on Christina twice already, once in the bathroom stall at some club with a drunken girl barely old enough to have gotten in legally and once with a receptionist at the firm. The memories of past indiscretions seemed to come out of nowhere, appearing only now that they had some relevance. As he stepped in front of Shirley he had the unsettling feeling that these memories were pushing aside something else that was far more important. But the idea of hooking up with the hot waitress clouded not only his real and false memories, but erased his feelings of anxiety as well.

As they talked, she lightly brushed his arm with the tips of her fingers and he reached out and placed his hand on her waist. She gave him her phone number and he asked her what time she got off. Things seemed to be going well, but as he leaned in for a kiss to seal the deal, she pulled back, a guilty expression on her features. Shirley



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had seen Wesley in the pub with his girlfriend many times before so she was able to recognize her now.

Wesley turned and saw Christina standing just behind him, staring at him and the waitress whose waist his hand still rested upon. There was no sadness to be found in her eyes, only cold, seething rage. Before Wesley could say anything in his defense, she slapped him. Hard. The sound was like the cracking of a whip and those who heard it stopped talking and turned to observe the scene unfolding next to the register. Those that didn't hear it could sense something amiss in those seated next to them and the awareness spread through the room like a ripple in a pond. Soon everyone was paying attention to the quarreling couple. The only sound was the muted song coming from the jukebox in the corner. Even if the heaviest of heavy metal bands had been playing live that night, it was very possible the patrons could still have heard Christina over the din. Metallica hath no fury like a women scorned.

"You son of a bitch!" Christina screamed, slapping Wesley again. Even harder this time.

"Baby, listen, I..." Wesley began. Christina moved to slap him again, but he blocked the blow. "I can explain."

"Bullshit!" She yelled. "Unless you're about to explain how you were making plans to go home with this slut then whatever you have to say to me is going to be bullshit."

Shirley, who had been backing away slowly, contemplated defending her actions, but then decided against it. The look in Christina's eyes led her to believe that maybe even Wesley wouldn't be making it out of this one alive. She melted into the crowd as best she could and quickly made her way towards and through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door that led into the kitchen.

"Why did you bother asking me out for drinks if you were planning on pulling shit like this?"

Wesley all of a sudden understood the unsettling feeling of having forgotten something that had been gnawing at him only moments before. Two days ago, long

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before Dean had suggested it today, he made plans to meet Christina at O'Malley's. The fact that two days ago he'd never actually spoken to Christina in any capacity less than professional certainly played a contributing factor in his forgetfulness. The idea of riding Shirley, perhaps in the backroom, hadn't helped either

"Christina, sweetie, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. It'll never happen again. I promise."

New sets of memories emerged and Wesley knew it is the wrong thing to say before she even responded. He had remembered cheating on Christina twice before, but hadn't remembered being caught both times as well.

"That's what you said last time, Wesley. And the time before that. I've had enough. I deserve better. You deserve shit. You deserve VD from that skanky waitress. We're finished. I never want to hear from you again. Got it?"

Wesley was unprepared for the final slap that punctuated the end of their very public breakup. He rubbed his burning cheek with his right hand as Christina stormed through the crowd of onlookers and exited the pub. None of the patrons dared make eye contact with her as she passed.

Wesley turned to his colleagues in the booth at the back for support, hoping to find solace in their friendship. He was greeted by three laughing faces instead.

Wesley, still upset about the confrontation with Christina, hardly realized he wasn't returning to his normal hole in the wall when he unlocked the door to his expensive condo uptown instead of the cramped confines of the usual bachelor apartment downtown. He was pleasantly, if only momentarily, surprised.

The place was huge.

It was filled with nice furniture instead of ratty hand-me-downs and Salvation Army cast-offs. He had two plasma televisions. A state of the art stereo system with surround sound had replaced his two-speaker tape deck job. A very expensive computer was set up in one of the

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two offices whereas before there was only a 5-year-old Dell resting on a milk crate in the corner. The kitchen was spotless and complete with a vast array of high-tech appliances. The closets were filled with row upon row of snappy, overpriced clothes and fine shoes. The immaculately clean bathroom was larger than the entirety of the aforementioned bachelor pad. The king-sized bed replaced the futon and was made up with crisp, unstained linen and covered with comfortable, down-filled pillows.

A slight sense of something akin to vertigo attacked Wesley suddenly, causing minute feelings of nausea. It seemed that to keep from going crazy, the memories of his past life were only being replaced when they come into conflict with the new. It was operating under the same principal of dipping your toe in a cool pool before diving in headfirst. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and after a moment, the feeling of unease passed and the two disparate sets of memories merged. A tolerable, however precarious, balance was achieved. He had lived both there AND here.

He kicked off his expensive dress shoes and slipped out of the even more expensive suit jacket. He crossed the foyer into the living room, and by the time he reached the plush sofa and dropped onto it, had walked enough feet to have traversed his old place a half dozen times. As he admired his newfound existence, the flashing red light on the cradle of the nearby cordless phone grabbed his attention. He picked it up and observed the digital readout indicating he had MISSED 3 CALLS and had MESSAGES WAITING. The first was from Christina, reminding him of their engagement at O'Malley's Pub.

"Figures." Wesley muttered, pressing the '7' button to delete the message. "Some wish that turned out to be."

The second message began to play, and from the tone of the speaker's voice Wesley knew from the very first word it was bad news. It was his boss, the old man he so often tried to ingratiate himself upon. Apparently he hadn't tried hard enough.

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“Wesley? It’s Jones. God dammit, man, I don’t know what the hell you were thinking. Were you even thinking? How you figured you could switch the accounts and shipping manifests in the Hawksbury Case without getting caught is beyond me. I figured you for smarter than that.”

“Oh shit.” Wesley whispered, remembering the Caferty file he had ‘solved’ that afternoon. The old man had found out somehow and was pissed. Wesley thought he had covered his tracks well enough that no one would detect his actions unless they were actively looking for it. The line between frugal bookkeeping and fraud was, after all, a pretty thin one.

Before he could find the fault in a scheme he had thought of as faultless, the old man continued.

“You had a great career here, Wesley.” He said. He sounded only somewhat disappointed. “You had a fantastic future, as well. But some digging has revealed that you had a less than stellar past. If any of these... discrepancies... should ever come to light, it would open the company up to so many multi-million dollar lawsuits it’s gonna keep me awake at night for months. Count yourself lucky that I’m not going to the authorities with this information and...”

CLICK.

The robotic female voice announcing that the old man had used up the allotted amount of time per message jarred Wesley from the mental fugue his brain had fallen into as he tried to comprehend what the hell was happening to his new, perfect life. First Christina and now this. The artificial voice of the answering machine reminded him of the third floor and the elevator asking him if he required any assistance. He couldn’t understand it. The genie told him the wishes wouldn’t backfire. It said there were no tricks involved. Wesley had done everything right and it wasn’t fair that things were now going so horribly wrong.

Before he could formulate any kind of answer to this riddle, the machine began playing the third message

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stored in its digital databank. It was Jones again, briefer than previously and far more to the point.

“Goddamn fucking machines.” He screamed into the phone, berating Wesley’s voicemail. “Always running out of friggin’ time before you can collect your thoughts. The point is, Wesley, you’re gone. You’re outta here. You are no longer an employee of Bachman and Stark Law. And as far as I’m concerned, you never were. Don’t bother coming back into work. I’d wish you well, but let’s be honest; if any of this shit ever comes back to haunt me or my company, it’ll be your ass taking the fall, not mine. Goodnight.”

CLICK. END OF MESSAGES.

*Wish*, Wesley thought. *This is all that Goddamn elevator’s fault.* He conveniently ignored the fact that, without the genie’s magic, he wouldn’t have had anything to lose in the first place. As far as he was concerned, the wishes backfired just as he had been promised they wouldn’t. The genie was in breach of contract, not him.

“Son of a bitch!” He shouted to the empty room. “If I...”

Wesley stopped speaking before any further words spilled past his frothing lips. *It’s not a matter of ‘if I’, it’s a matter of ‘when I’* he thought. After all, he had one wish left. *I’ll be damned if I let that bastard get the better of me again*, his mind seethed. Almost instantly, as it had been with the second wish, the third sprang to mind.

Although the memories at the law firm may not have been ‘real’ in the truest sense of the word, he had spent the last 6 years of his life at Bachman and Stark Law and learned more than a thing or two about legal loopholes.

Wesley grabbed his coat and expensive shoes and stormed out of the condo, not bothering to lock the door behind him. He wasn’t worried about the expensive stuff he had wished into existence being stolen. He would get it all back again anyway with his third wish even if it was. The stuff. The job. Christina. In fact, in lieu of the third and final wish, he hadn’t actually gotten any of it yet anyway.

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\* \* \*

Even in the grip of his outrage, Wesley was cognizant of the fact that he might not be able to get into the building. Not because of the late hour, but because he more than expected the old man to have already contacted building security, banning him from the premises. But he hadn't and Wesley was able to enter as easily as he had that morning, either as the blue-collar schmuck he was then or the high-priced lawyer people now believed him to be.

He was treated far more civilly as the latter.

"Good evening, Mr. Madigan." George, the security guard on duty, said to him as he entered the foyer and made his way towards the service lift. "Burning the candle at both ends tonight, I see."

"Yeah, something like that." Wesley muttered, pressing the call button.

The doors opened and he was momentarily startled as Andre, his old co-worker, backed out and into him, pulling a cart loaded with two or three computers. He shot Wesley a nervous glance and tried to force a smile to override the guilty expression on his face.

"Good evening, sir." He said. And then, indicating the electronics he had no right to be handling, "I was just... umm... moving these to... umm..."

"Keep 'em, Andre. I don't give a shit. Now, get out of my way."

"Um, yes sir." Andre said, more confused by the fact that the suit knew his name than angry at having been dismissed so rudely.

Wesley climbed into the elevator and his reflection greeted him. He winced at the sight of the stricken features he saw adorning his face. He looked haggard. He pressed the 'DOORS CLOSED' button and waited a moment before pressing the one to take him to the third floor.

"It's okay." He said to himself, taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from his brow. "I can do this."

He turned away from the back of the elevator, and so engrossed in the task at hand, didn't notice that his

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reflection inexplicably remained facing forward, staring at his exposed back. Wesley pressed the button and the car immediately ascended to the requested destination. After coming to a smooth stop, the cab was filled with an eerie silence, almost suffocating in its oppressiveness. No voice emitted from the speaker box. The phone didn't ring

"Hello?" He said, faking a level of confidence he didn't actually have. "Where are you? Answer me, God dammit!"

"Hello, Wesley." The genie finally said. "How may I be of assistance?"

The voice didn't emanate from the speakers or the phone. It now seemed to come from the very car itself. It had lost the previous robotic twang and seemed even more familiar. Although, in the moment, Wesley couldn't recall from where he had heard it before. Truth be told, he couldn't have cared less at that moment.

"Your wishes backfired!" He shouted, continuing to stare straight ahead, having already mentally ascribed the doors of the cab as the magical entity's face. If he hadn't anthropomorphized the machine and had bothered to turn around, he would have seen that his reflective double had moved one step closer to the glass wall dividing them. The glass that now seemed more like a supernatural window than an everyday mirror. As Wesley clenched his fists, impatiently awaiting a response, the thing behind him independently began rubbing its hands together in greedy anticipation.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Wesley." The genie finally responded, the lips of the reflection forming the words. "I do believe I lived up to my end of the bargain. Would you like to make your third and final wish now?"

"Don't fuck with me!" Wesley shouted. "I made two wishes already and they've both gone to hell. You said there were no tricks involved!"

Wesley's voice was starting to gain an edge of the confidence he had previously been lacking. It stemmed from the belief that his entitlements had been infringed and the false notion that the genie was there at his behest when, in fact, it was the other way around. If he had

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known this at the time, things may not have ended so drastically. At the very least, it probably would have been far less messy.

"You made two wishes and I granted them. Anything that happened thereafter cannot be my fault. Now, wish a third and final time."

"Wait a Goddamn second!" Wesley said, doubt starting to creep into his voice. He quickly tried to push it away, convincing himself that he was still the victim. "No. That's not how it happened at all. You may have gotten me my dream job, but I lost it. You got me my dream girl, but she left me. You didn't fulfill a fucking thing."

"Listen to yourself. *You* lost the job. Christina left *you*. If you clear a man accused of insider trading one day and he commits murder the next, is that your fault? Now, wish."

"Shut up." Wesley stammered, losing his composure. "I didn't do anything. It's not fair."

"You were going to cheat on your girlfriend so she left you. How is that unfair?"

"I didn't know I was going to get caught! I didn't know I had gotten caught before and used up all of my second chances until it was too late" Wesley said, not comprehending how anyone couldn't follow his twisted logic. He was beginning to grow frustrated again. "That's bullshit and you know it. What about my job? I got fired for something I can only remember doing. I had no control over that."

"You had control over your mouth, didn't you?"

"What?" Wesley squeaked, the confusion and anger combining to make him speak in a higher pitch than he would have liked. He sounded weak to his own ears. It wasn't how he wanted to sound. He wanted to sound like the genie. He wanted to be in control of the situation.

"You were so proud of your devious, underhanded wheeling and dealing that you just had to tell someone, didn't you?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."



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“Perhaps you can ask Dean Headley the next time you see him. I imagine it will be when you’re cleaning out your office. I believe it now belongs to him.”

“Motherfucker.” Wesley whispered, realizing that Dean had gone behind his back and ratted him out to the old man. Dejected, he leaned against the wall of the elevator. The thing reflected in it correspondingly moved forward, but instead of in the defeated motion Wesley exhibited, it’s was far more deliberate. It’s poise was sinister rather than slumping.

After a moment, Wesley straightened, newfound conviction appearing on his features. He took a step forward and confronted the elevator doors, the arbitrary face. His reflection took the last step forward as well.

“I won’t be cleaning anything out of my office.” Wesley said, strength returning to the timbre of his voice.

“Are you ready to make your last wish, then?” The genie asked.

“I’m ready to make a wish, yes, but it won’t be the last.” He responded, a sneer on his face.

The elevator shuddered in response. It could have been a growl or chuckle.

“You told me I couldn’t wish for infinite wishes so I’m not. I’m wishing to start over. My third wish is that we go back to when this all began and you have to grant me my three wishes again. A do-over. This time they won’t fail. I won’t let them.”

The request was followed by a moment of silence and Wesley wondered if he was about to be denied. He wondered if the cables and pulleys, steel and circuits that he envisioned made up the thing’s brain had discovered a fault in his reasoning.

“Granted” It said finally.

If Wesley had been expecting some grand alteration of the world around him he was disappointed. The elevator remained the same, as did his position within it. There was no loud BANG, no flashing of bright lights. As before, things were one-way one minute then different the next. As far as he was concerned, the only notable differences were minor. He was no longer dressed in the

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fine Armani suit he had boarded the car wearing, but the tattered, dirty overalls from that morning. The same garbage bin that had accompanied him then had also returned. The only major change, lost on Wesley for a moment, was that he was no longer alone.

It took him a second to sense the presence of the other. When he did, he turned and the reflection on the smooth surface of the elevator wall startled him. He shrieked and was about to admonish himself for showing another sign of weakness in the genie's presence. Before he could, it registered on him that the reflection had not screamed in unison. If anything, it smiled slyly. The moment of relief he had felt thinking he had just been scared by, in essence, his own shadow, was quickly squashed. Although he couldn't explain it, the thing staring back at him with his own eyes was anything but a reflection.

"Hello, Wesley." It said.

All of a sudden Wesley knew why the voice, which had begun so robotically, had been growing more and more familiar. It had been becoming his.

His terror mounted as the reflection took one last step forward, and instead of running into the mirror's other side, walked through it as if passing through a vertical wall of water. The surface that had appeared solid before was momentarily rippled and distorted. Clear of it, the first thing the reflection did was to take a deep breath. It was as if it had been drowning and was just pulled from the sea.

"You have no idea how good that felt." It said, rubbing its chin. Even in the moment, Wesley noticed that the thing, unlike him, was left-handed. It was his mirror opposite.

Wesley attempted a response, but could only manage a strangled cry. He was almost as white as the pressed dress shirt he had only moments ago been wearing.

"To have lungs again!" The thing continued. "A body. Even if it is yours. Or was, as the case might be. That was my wish. I've been trapped in some fashion or

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another – lamp, elevator, even once in a HAM radio – for decades. I’m just glad to be free at last. Even if it is in your pathetic skin.”

“I... I don’t understand.” Wesley stammered.

“Why would you? This is a matter of magic, not really your realm of expertise. You freed me, Wesley. My end of the bargain was to grant you three wishes. No tricks. No lies. All you had to do was make all three. When I granted your third and final wish, for us to start over, I was released from my prison. Freed from my torment. No longer required to grant wishes to those too ungrateful to appreciate their own lives. In return for granting the wishes, I am given a body with which to resume living. That body shall be of him or her whose wishes I grant. You may have arrogantly thought you had me fooled, Wesley, but in the end you only sealed your own fate. Third time’s the charm, so they say.”

If there was any hope that he would walk out of the elevator alive it fled from Wesley’s mind in that moment. He bravely faced his end by wetting his pants and beginning to blubber and cry.

“No, please, don’t. I’ll go back and live like before. I’ll live my old life and be happy. I’ll appreciate it. Please, just let me live. I’ll bring you someone new. His name is Andre. He’ll make three wishes, I promise. Please, let me go.”

“Sorry, Wesley.” The thing said, smiling. The cavernous grin revealed razor sharp teeth that ran three rows deep. “We can’t very much have two of us running around now, can we? Those are the rules. And you’re out of wishes.”

The thing moved quickly, grabbing Wesley by the shoulders with hands that now resembled talons. It slammed him against the wall of the elevator, the reflective surface shattering upon impact. The wind was knocked out of Wesley and canceled the ear-piercing cry for help he was about to unleash. The talons tore through the overalls and pierced the skin, digging deeper until they scraped the bones of his shoulder blades. The thing raised it’s victim

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off of the floor until Wesley's head hit the ceiling of the elevator car, 10 feet above.

A long, serpentine tale erupted from the thing's lower back, ripping through the clothes and curling up above it's head. The hardened, pointed tip of the tail hovered before Wesley's suspended chest only a moment before striking forward, boring through the body and impaling him to the wall.

It's hands freed, the thing stepped back, the tale long enough to keep Wesley firmly pinned. Tilting it's head to the left and right, it admired it's handiwork. The idea of saying '*Be careful what you wish for*' crossed it's mind, but it decided against uttering the words. It had always been a firm believer that one shouldn't play with their food.

With sharp nails, it easily slashed open the overalls from Wesley's shoulder to hip. The fabric fell away, exposing the pale stomach beneath. It sliced the belly open just as easily, and as the glistening red insides spilled outside, began to eat.

By the end of the following day, the police and forensic crews had come and gone, gathering all of the evidence they could. It didn't amount to much. They were baffled. All that remained of Wesley was a few strips of flesh and gristle, some patches of hair, a few slabs of muscle and tendon, one tooth and several shards of bone, all scattered throughout the sticky puddles of blood pooled on the floor and coating the four walls and ceiling of the elevator car. No one came forward to file a missing person's report and the identity of the body was never discovered. How could it have been? The person the mess technically once was wasn't missing at all. Everyone caught entering and exiting the building by the watchful eye of the security cameras was accounted for. The case went unsolved and was soon discarded in favor of more pressing, solvable crimes.

The elevator needed to be cleaned and no one on the maintenance crew wanted to have anything to do with it. No one but Wesley, that was. He volunteered to clean

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up, and unlike everyone else, didn't seem to mind taking on the task. In fact, as he approached what best resembled a slaughterhouse, mop and bucket in hand, he was whistling a happy tune.

Wesley Madigan loved his life. He loved it with a passion.

**THE END**

## **Tale #3**

### **For A Good Time Call...**

Tommy looked at the number on the bathroom wall of the shitty dance club and thought nothing of it. He was with friends. The girl of his dreams, although unaware of his affection, was among their group. Mid-term exams were over and the holiday season was near. No more late night cram sessions or early morning labs. A time to relax, not worry. A time to recharge the batteries in preparation for the spring semester. He and the night were young and full of potential.

It all started to fall apart when he left the men's room. He crossed the crowded dance floor, banged into a number of gyrating couples and moved to join his friends occupying the plush booth at the back of the bar. His best friend, Rob, was the only one there. Everyone else, his girl included, was gone.

"Hey, where is everybody?" Tommy said, shouting to be heard above the rhythmic thumping of the bass-driven music.

"Dancing." Rob said, taking a swig of his beer. He looked very uncomfortable.

"Were you waiting for me?"

"Yup." Another monosyllabic answer. Another swig of beer.

"Okay, well let's go."

"That's not why I waited." Rob said. You knew he was about to say something serious because he set down his half-finished bottle without the customary swig that usually preceded such an act. "There's something you should know. I stayed behind because I wanted to give you a heads up."

"What is it?"

"It's Wendy."

"What about her?" Tommy asked, his stomach dropping. He'd been in this situation before. He had hoped he wouldn't have to endure it tonight.

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“Well, she may have *come* alone, but I don’t think she’ll be *leaving* alone.”

“What?”

Rob directed Tommy’s gaze towards the center of the dance floor. Wendy was in the arms of another guy. More accurately, her leg was raised and resting on his hip, her hands clamped firmly to his ass while she rode up and down on his pelvis. He had one hand on the small of her back and the other on her right breast as they publicly dry humped.

“Son of a bitch.” Tommy said. He felt like bellowing in rage. He felt like charging across the room, breaking the two of them apart and demanding an answer for her disgusting behavior. Unfortunately, the guy was three times his size and she wasn’t actually doing anything wrong. There was no commitment between her and Tommy. He hadn’t even built up the courage to tell her how he felt yet.

“What the hell am I supposed to do now?” He asked.

“Let her go, man. Kick it to the curb. There’s plenty of other fish. You know, shit like that.” Rob responded. Then another swig of beer.

“I don’t want other fish.” Tommy said morosely. “Do you think it’d be different if she knew how I felt about her?”

“Dude,” Rob said, shaking his head. “Everybody knows how you feel about her. I’m sure she does, too.”

“Do you think she’s trying to make me jealous?” Tommy asked. He was trying to remain cool, but was having a hard go at it. Wendy wasn’t making him jealous. She was making him want to cry.

“I just don’t think she’s interested.” Rob said. “I’m sorry, man. Best you come to terms with that now.”

But Tommy wouldn’t let it go. He ordered and quickly downed four shots of tequila before making his move. He had been feeling slightly inebriated before seeing Wendy and her beefy partner on the dance floor, now he was feeling absolutely shit-faced.

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“Wendy, can I talk to you for a minute?” He asked, tapping her on her beautiful shoulder when he reached them. She had to remove her tongue from the guy’s mouth in order to answer.

“Hey, Tommy. What’s up? I’m kinda busy here.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Tommy said. Even with the copious amount of alcohol flowing through his veins he still stammered. “It’s about that. It’s important.”

“What’s this all about?” She asked impatiently.

“Hey, buddy.” The guy said, his voice as big as his chest. He didn’t even need to shout like Tommy and Wendy did just to be heard above the music. “Leave the lady alone. We’re dancing here.”

“If you really thought of her as a lady you wouldn’t be dancing with her like that.” Tommy said defensively. “If you can even call that dancing. Looks more like rape to me.”

“Tommy!” Wendy said, shocked.

“What’d you say, you little faggot?” The guy said, letting go of Wendy’s breast to grab the collar of Tommy’s shirt.

“You heard me, you stupid troglodyte. Wendy, you can do better than this guy. Trust me. You deserve someone better. Someone who’ll treat you the way you deserve to be treated. Someone like me.”

“What are you talking about, Tommy?” Wendy asked.

“Forget this guy. Come home with me tonight. I... I love you.”

The Sasquatch let go of Tommy’s shirt. Not in order to haul off and crack him on the chin, but because he required both of his hands to maintain his balance as he doubled over laughing.

“Holy shit, that’s fucking hilarious.” He said.

“Tommy, go home. You’re drunk.” Wendy said, trying to sound serious while fighting back a fit of giggles of her own.

“I’m telling you the truth.” Tommy said, crestfallen.

“So am I. I’m not interested, okay. Go home.”



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Wendy and the guy turned and left, leaving Tommy and his destroyed ego alone in a sea of sweaty dancers. Rob approached a moment later, bringing him a freshly opened bottle of beer. It was apparently his idea of an adequate consolation prize. Kind of like the home game version for the heartbroken.

“Didn’t go too well, did it?” He asked.

“I think I’m gonna be sick.” Tommy said, rushing for the bathroom.

He wasn’t, and after a few minutes, looked at the number on the wall for the second time.

And called.

The girl, Jenny, picked up on the second ring. She had to ask Tommy to speak up twice. Whereas the sounds of the bar he was in were somewhat muffled due to his being in the bathroom, she was on her cell phone in the middle of a dance floor at another bar just three blocks away. She was having trouble hearing him.

“You’re gonna have to speak up, sweetheart. Who are you and why are you calling me?”

“Um, my name’s Tommy. I got your number from a, um, a friend of mine. He said, well, if I was ever looking for a good time to give you a call.”

“Yeah, right.” Jenny said. Tommy could actually see her rolling her eyes in his mind. “And would your friend happen to be the bathroom wall at Icon?”

Icon was a trance club two blocks away. He was at The Lagoon. *Does this girl get around or what?* Tommy thought. He figured the lavatory in the bar she was currently at carried her name and number as well. Perhaps all of the watering holes in the market district did.

“No, really.” Tommy said, embarrassed. “It was my friend, um, Tim.”

“Tim and Tommy, hunh? I bet you make quite a pair. Look, I’m a busy girl. I don’t really care where you got my number from, okay? I just want to know how long it’ll take for you to get here. I’m at Bela’s. Do you know it?”

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“Yes, I do. Um, I can be there in five minutes?” Tommy said, so excited and nervous his answer sounded more like a question.

“Excellent. When you get to the door tell them you’re there to see me. I have a private room in the back. Very exclusive. They’ll let you right in”

“Okay.” Tommy said, gulping.

He didn’t bother telling his friends, even Rob, that he was leaving. He felt like telling Wendy, but couldn’t find her. The fact that she was probably giving the big guy a hand job in the back seat of a cab on the way back to his place only strengthened his resolve.

Minutes later, he told the skinny, pale-faced doorman at Bela’s that he was there to see Jenny. He was immediately admitted even though there was a line-up around the block. He had never been to Bela’s before, and when he entered he discovered it was a Goth club. Everyone was clad in leather and fishnets, had multiple piercings and wore dark make-up over pale skin. Other than black and white, the only other color in the place’s palette was a blood-red lighting scheme that flickered in a stroboscopic pattern to music from bands like Bauhaus, Skinny Puppy and The Cure.

Tommy was escorted down a long corridor to a set of large doors with ornate carvings of devils and angles upon them. They were opened, and with some caution, he stepped into the room beyond. Jenny sat on a couch in the center of the room wearing thigh-high, high-heeled boots, fishnets and a tight, black corset. Her skin was pale and her eyes smeared with black make-up. She wore a coat of bright red lipstick that made her full lips glisten. Her lower lip, tongue and eyebrow were all pierced. She wore her hair in a short Mohawk and looked like she could eat Tommy alive.

“So, you must be Tommy.” She said.

“Um, yep.” Tommy replied. He was so uncomfortable he felt like running away. His imagination, however, was providing too many sexual scenarios that Wendy may be involved in at just that moment to go. How

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could he leave and let her win a competition she wasn't even aware she was having?

It was his last chance to escape and he didn't take it. The large, heavy doors slammed shut behind him and he heard the locking mechanism trigger. From behind the velvet curtains that draped the wall of the oval room, a number of emaciated, pasty-skinned, near-naked men and women emerged. Some were snarling and all were barring fanged teeth. Some smiled eerily and licked their lips. Others rubbed long-fingered, sharp-nailed hands together in anticipation. They all began to encircle a very confused Tommy.

As they drew nearer, his confusion turned more and more into terror.

"Hey, what's going on here?" He said, his voice raising an octave or ten.

"I thought you said you wanted to party with us?" Jenny said from the couch, overseeing the scene unfolding before her as a Queen would a beheading.

"I thought I was going to party with *you*." Tommy said as the figures closed in on him. "Not... your *friends*."

"I may join in later." Jenny said, putting her pinky finger in her mouth and picking at her own set of fangs. They were stained crimson. "But I did just eat and a girl has to watch her figure, you know."

"What!" Tommy shouted as many clawed hands began grabbing him and tearing off his clothes. "What's going on here?"

"Haven't you figured it out yet? We're vampires, silly. And you're our dinner. Did you really think we were interested in you for anything else?"

"But...but..." Tommy began to protest as the coven surrounding him began to lick his exposed skin and nibble his available flesh. "The note on the wall said this was supposed to be for a good time!"

"It will be." Jenny said, smiling sinisterly. "For us."

# The Ghoul Mortician

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*For Jack Ketchum*

### 1

This is a story about conquering fears. More specifically, it is the story of how Martin Mayberry conquered his. Doing so saved his life, but most would contest it also created a monster.

It began at Straub Funeral Home where Martin was one of Riker Straub's two apprentices. He had been working under Straub for five years and Riker had been working for what seemed like a hundred. Riker Straub was nearing retirement, and with death no doubt not long to follow, was looking to bequeath the business to one of his two protégés. He had already arranged for his remains to be handled by the funeral home he established and wanted to be sure both his business *and* his body were left in the most capable hands.

Although no challenge had officially been declared, Martin was competing against Anthony Di'Angelo, an Italian immigrant who had been at Straub's for three years. The race was tight; Martin and Anthony were similar in most every respect. Their knowledge of the mortuary business was encyclopedic. Their cosmetic and reconstructive ability was unmatched by any of the local competition and on par with the best in the state. Their product knowledge and prowess for pushing the expensive casket or the more elaborate service was unparalleled. Either one would make a worthy successor, but at the moment, Anthony had a slight advantage.

He, unlike Martin, was not afraid of food or flying.

The ability to network was a very important factor in the funeral business. It was essential to cutting overhead costs. Being able to meet with suppliers at conferences and conventions and securing competitive deals was an integral part of the business. No matter how much extra money Martin made Straub with his excellent salesmanship, it couldn't compete with the amount of money Anthony *saved* the company with all of his wining and dinning. He took executives from all over the country to the finest restaurants and bistros. He cut lucrative deals on anything

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ranging from caskets and urns to the price of embalming fluid if purchased in bulk. Martin's fear of food and flying severely stunted his mobility and sociability and all but destroyed his chances of matching Anthony in that respect. But he was determined to keep trying.

Standing in the plush showroom, Martin contemplated this as a grieving father mulled over his sales pitch to go with the Berkley casket instead of one of the cheaper, although equally adequate, models.

"I'm just not sure." The man said. "With my accident and my daughter's medical bills I'm not sure I can afford it."

The man had just come out of a wretched couple of weeks. A near-fatal car accident had left him paralyzed a week before the son he was there to bury had died of leukemia. Something horrible had happened to his daughter and it would take years of therapy to draw her out of the near-catatonic state she was now in. Truth be told, a pine box would have probably stretched the man's budget. But Martin had a job to do and a career to secure so he pushed on.

"I understand your concern, Mr. Wallace." Martin said, his voice somber out of respect for the man's loss. It was almost theater. "But the Berkley model is more than just a casket. It's not only the last thing you will ever buy for your son; it will also be his final resting place on this earth. I'm sure you want to give him the best."

"Well, I..." Mr. Wallace began.

"I'll tell you what I can do for you." Martin said, his voice still reverent even though his actions were no less reprehensible than selling a lemon to a first time car buyer. "I can offset some of the cost of the casket by giving you a 15% discount on the floral arrangement."

"Alright, I can go for that." Mr. Wallace said after considering the offer.

"Very good." Martin said, smiling. "You've made a very wise decision. I'm sure Mitchell would appreciate it."

Martin felt like throwing up. Not because he had any moral compunctions about exploiting a person's

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bereavement for personal gain, but because he hadn't made any strives to secure the inheritance of the funeral home. He was close to making the sale, but would likely catch flak for offering 15% off the flowers even though Anthony had already swung a 25% deal with the florist. There was still a chance he could salvage his profit margin if he managed to convince the man to go with Norma Hamilton's Catering Services. They had a standing offer with Straub's that paid a cash bonus for all new business referred their way. Martin didn't push them on the man just then. He was in no rush. Norma's prices were comparable to most others and it would be a much easier sale than the overpriced coffin had been. He had time to play it cool.

As Mr. Wallace scanned through the glossy catalogue pages advertising potential caterers, Martin walked to the window and stared out at the blowing snow. At least a foot had fallen since he came into work that morning and the forecast was calling for more. The drive to Boston would take at least twice as long and he was already pushing things as it was. The convention started at 1 p.m. on Saturday afternoon and he was already planning on being on the road for most of the night. He was packed and ready to go, the overnight bag in the trunk of his car, but had been hoping to catch a bite to eat after his shift. With the weather the way it was, he would have to hit the road immediately after work if he had any hope of making it to the convention on time. If he couldn't manage to swing at least half a dozen decent deals, there was no way he could stay competitive with Anthony and have a chance of Straub Funeral Home one day becoming Straub and Mayberry.

As he thought of this, Martin caught Anthony's reflection in the window and clenched his fists. The man was walking towards him, with a smug expression on his face.

"It's really coming down now, isn't it?" Anthony whispered, commenting on the late season storm. "Doesn't look like it will be letting up anytime soon, either."

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“What’s your point, Tony?” Martin asked through gritted teeth.

“Just that you’re gonna have a hard go at it in that old jalopy of yours. My flight leaves first thing tomorrow morning so I have nothing to worry about. The storm is supposed to pass by then. In fact, I should get there with plenty of time to spare.”

“Good for you.” Martin said, trying to stay the rising anger in his voice. Mr. Wallace was only a dozen feet away and hadn’t signed any papers yet. It would be bad for Martin’s sale if he allowed Anthony’s goading to cause him to explode.

“In fact,” Anthony continued. “I have enough spare time that I’m taking Mr. Straub out for a nice dinner tonight. You know, at a fine, five star restaurant? The kind of place that doesn’t have French fries or pizza on the menu?”

“You’re a first class asshole, do you know that?” Martin said, turning away from the window to stare down his opponent.

“A first class asshole who is only weeks away from becoming your boss, Martin.” Anthony replied, the smug smile growing to the point where he was starting to resemble the main character in that old William Castle movie, *Mr. Sardonicus*. “You might as well forgo the trip altogether. I’m not sure Straub Funeral Home will be requiring your services much longer anyways.”

“Drop dead.”

“Eat me.”

“Excuse me.” Mr. Wallace said, cautiously interrupting the heated discussion. “I was wondering if I could get your advice on a possible caterer for my son’s wake. I was thinking of going with Norma Hamilton’s.”

“No, no no.” Anthony said before Martin could make a comment. “You don’t want to go with them. Horrible, overpriced food. I’m sure Mr. Mayberry can suggest a better alternative.”

“Okay.” Mr. Wallace said. “Let’s see who else there is.”



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As Martin pretended to glance at the open catalogue, his attention remained mostly focused on Anthony's back as he departed the showroom, a slight swagger to his walk. Martin couldn't help but wonder if God would crash a plane if he prayed hard enough.

### 2

It took Martin 15 minutes to clear the roof and windows of snow and another half hour to get the car out of the unplowed parking lot. He was out of town and on the highway by 6:30, already an hour behind schedule. He pressed his foot down on the accelerator and increased his already reckless speed. He had too many miles of farmland to clear before reaching his destination. The car skidded and swerved through snowdrifts and concealed patches of black ice, but remained, for the time being, under Martin's control. Visibility was no more than two meters and half the time he wasn't sure he was still in the right lane. The windshield wipers fought valiantly to keep up with the heavily falling snow, but they were fighting a losing battle. Martin began to wonder not if he would reach his destination on time, but if he would reach it at all.

The rumbling in his stomach reminded him that he had skipped supper and it momentarily drew his morbid thoughts away from a potentially horrible crash. He slowed the car and began scanning the passing signs for advance warning of any potential eateries on the road ahead. Most of the signs were illegible, covered with heavy snow. He eventually spotted the lights of a truck stop through the storm and pulled in.

The macadam parking lot had recently been cleared of snow and he had no problem maneuvering the vehicle into a spot between a battered Chevy and the large, yellow plough no doubt responsible for the snows removal. The owner of the hulking behemoth probably received a free meal for taking care of the white mess.

Martin entered Penney's, the name of the filthy truck stop eatery, and found it almost full to capacity. No doubt other motorists had pulled in to escape the storm

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and were content hanging around until the weather improved. He was on a strict deadline and didn't have time to wait. He went directly to the counter and placed his order with an overweight, haggard looking waitress named Mable. She was in her late forties and the sour countenance on her face indicated that, although having other ambitions and dreams, being a waitress at this long haul truck stop may have been the only career path she ever traveled.

"What can I get for ya?" She asked Martin as he took a seat on one of the many stools running the length of the filthy counter. Her voice was as surly as her features.

Martin stared up at the menu mounted on the wall above the window that offered a view of the greasy kitchen beyond. He could see two men, even more overweight than Mable, clad in stained aprons preparing the meals. Every combo on display contained some form of meat product – cheeseburger, hamburger, sausage, bacon, steak – and Martin frowned.

"Do you have any combinations that don't include a meat product?"

"Oh," Mable said, her sour countenance and surly voice worsening. "You're one of those, are ya?"

"One of what?" Martin asked even though he knew where the conversation was going. He'd been having it in some form or another ever since he was a kid. He had grown up with a severe aversion to many of the most common and popular foods. He wasn't allergic to anything, just really, really fussy. He didn't know the word cibophobia, but he fit the definition. Over the course of his life he had become a master at deflecting questions or comments whenever food became an issue.

- No, that's okay. I've already eaten.

- No, thank you, I have a large supper planned for when I get home.

- I'm sorry, I can't. I have an upset stomach from something I ate earlier.

None of these defense mechanisms worked when placing an order at a dingy truck stop in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere in the middle of a blizzard,

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however, and Martin was going to have to go through the motions if he wanted to get served.

“You know.” Mable continued. “A vegetarian. ‘Don’t eat the poor, precious animals’ kind of garbage. Hippie shit.”

“I’m just not in the mood for meat tonight.” Martin lied. It was often best to follow the path of least resistance with people like Mable. “Do you have any salad combos?”

“Take a look around, kid. Do you think any of these brutes want a salad?”

Most of the truckers in the place were at least a hundred pounds overweight and currently stuffing their mouths with forkfuls of bacon, sausage and other assorted dead things. They were all sweating as if the act of chewing had become a laborious task. Martin couldn’t help but think having a cardiologist on staff wouldn’t be a bad idea for a place like this. God knew he cut open enough fat bastards with failed pumps in his line of work.

“Can I just get an order of fries, please? To go?”

“If you want the fries you’ve got to get the combo.” Mable responded. “We don’t sell ‘em separately.”

“But I’m not that hungry.”

“Could’ve fooled me. You look starving. All skin and bones. That wind out there could probably blow ya right over.”

“Alright, fine.” Martin acquiesced. “Can I get one of the combos then?”

“Which one?” Mable asked, the pen finally freed from behind her ear, poised over the pad in her hand, ready to scribble down the order.

“I guess it doesn’t really mater.” Martin said bitterly.

And it didn’t. He got the hamburger combo because it was the cheapest. It came with fries, a Pepsi and a small bag of Lays potato chips. Although it didn’t provide enough food to tide him over until Boston, the burger, with its burnt paddies and greasy buns, still went out the window before he pulled out of the parking lot.

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The snow was falling even worse than previously and it didn't take long before the discarded food in its soggy wrapper was completely buried.

### 3

Even if Martin had managed to maintain his excessive speed without sliding the car into the six-foot high snowdrift covering half of the highway, he still would have been famished by the time he reached Boston. When the car hit the patch of black ice, swerved left and then right and then left again, colliding with the drift on its side, he was already beginning to feel hunger pangs. He had finished the fries, chips and Pepsi an hour and a half earlier and they had done little to diminish his gnawing appetite.

The accident had frightened him and it wasn't until he regained his composure that he began the process of trying to extricate the trapped vehicle. He shifted from drive to reverse to drive again, pumping the gas pedal, trying to rock the car free from its snowy captor. After several failed attempts, he climbed out to better assess the situation. Mumbling obscenities under his breath, he buttoned up the collar of his parka against the bitter wind and freezing snow.

The fore and aft right tires of the car were completely imbedded in the drift. He only had a few roadside survival tools in the trunk and unfortunately a small shovel was not one of them. He began trying to dig the wheels out with his gloved hands, but it was a lost cause. For every handful of snow he removed another two would slip down the hill and fill in his work. As long as they remained buried, there was no way the wheels would get enough traction to budge the car an inch. Still, leaning against the trunk, Martin reached under the rear bumper and tried to manually rock it loose. It was as equally ineffective as digging the tires out had been.

"Son of a bitch." He shouted to the storm.

Opening the trunk, he searched through what tools he did have and discovered a few road flares. They were the only things of any use. He struck and placed them

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in a wide circle around the car to warn oncoming motorists. He also turned on his four-way flashers. Those necessary steps taken, there was nothing left to do but wait and think.

The driver of the plough at the truck stop could possibly be along any moment if he had been making his way east instead of west. The snowdrift seemed to indicate that this section of the highway hadn't been cleared in quite some time and gave Martin hope this was the direction the driver had been working. But the snow and wind had grown so fierce over the past couple of hours there was no way to be sure the road hadn't just filled in since the plough had passed through.

"Dammit!" Martin said. He hated uncertainty.

There was the possibility that another vehicle could come along and he would be able to flag down the driver. But the chance that another car would pass at that hour of the night in that inclement weather was even less feasible and more risky than waiting for the plough.

He could hope his engine held out until someone came to his rescue, but then he seriously ran the risk of freezing to death. Or starving to death. He had temporarily forgotten how hungry he had become, but physical inactivity as he pondered his options afforded his stomach the opportunity to resume its noisy rumblings. None of the options would get him to the convention in time for tomorrow.

The only other idea he had was to make his way to a local homestead for help. He had noticed the lights of a farmhouse a little more than a mile back, and although he dreaded the idea of backtracking, it seemed the best course of action. Not knowing how far he would have to go before he reached another dwelling secured the decision. There may be a place up ahead less than a mile away, but then again it could be five. The farmhouse behind him was a certainty. Plus, the potential house ahead could belong to a little old lady with a little old car. A farmer was sure to have a tractor or a powerful truck to help pull his car from the drift.

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Although in his heart he knew there was no longer any chance of making the convention on time, he still held out for a miracle. He couldn't let the dream of owning Straub Funeral Home die. He couldn't let Anthony win.

It was from this stubborn determination that he found the strength to face the blizzard head-on. He left a note with his name and cell phone number on the dashboard and turned to go. Shrinking into his parka as best he could to provide the least amount of surface area for the wind to buffet, he began trudging the mile and a half back to the farmhouse he had originally, luckily, avoided.

### 4

The walk seemed to last forever, but actually only took less than an hour. On the way, neither car nor plough passed Martin in either direction. Although he kept his head lowered for most of the trip and the exposed skin was limited, he nonetheless worried about frostbite. Eventually the light from the farmhouse broke through the storm and he turned right off of the highway, walking down the lengthy driveway to the front door. No path had been cleared and the snow came up to his hips in many places. His pants were soaked and thoughts of pneumonia began to compete with the worry of frostbite.

He stepped out of the snow and onto the relatively clear porch that ran the length of the front of the residence. Two chairs and a small table were to his left and a swinging bench, rusty chains squeaking as the winds rocked it back and forth, was to his right. A light burned brightly above the door directly in front of him. Even under the circumstances, he hesitated before knocking. Looking around, he surveyed what he could of the farmstead through the blowing snow. He spotted what he was looking for – the green and yellow John Deere tractor – across the field next to a large barn more than likely used for housing livestock. No path had been cleared to the machine as well and that fact, coupled with the nearly inaccessible driveway from house to highway, would

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necessitate all of Martin's sales skills to convince the owner to give him a tow.

The bitter wind picked up and erased any vestiges of social embarrassment. He knocked. The wind was howling around the house and probably muffled Martin's entreaty so he knocked again. As he prepared to knock a third time, the door opened and revealed the withered old face of the farmer who owned the place.

"Sweet Jesus." The old man said, laughing. "What do we have here? Never mind, don't answer. Just get in before you catch your death. Lord, this sure is peculiar. Come in, come in."

Martin stepped in, shaking the snow from his shoulders. He profusely thanked the old man who simply laughed it off.

"No need to thank me, sonny. What the hell else was I supposed ta do? Leave ya out there to freeze to death on my porch? What kinda Christian would I be if I did that? Not a very good one, I do believe. Lord, lookit those clothes. You're soaked to the bone. Not to worry, I got some stuff that should fit ya."

"Thank you." Martin said, taking off his damp gloves and heavy parka. He shoved the gloves into the left pocket, not wanting them to drip all over the cell phone in the right. "This is all very kind of you, but don't you want to hear my story before you offer your hospitality like that? Don't you want to know my name or how I got here first?"

"Posh." The old man said, taking Martin's coat and hanging it from a hook next to the door. A puddle of melting snow began to form underneath it almost instantly. "There'll be time enough for that once you're outta those wet clothes and into something dry and warm. Plus, I reckon I got it figured out most now anyways. You city folk can never figure out how to drive in the winter until spring comes. Now, once ya get outta those boots, go up these stairs here, turn left, and three doors down, you'll find a linen closet with towels to dry yourself off. Bathroom is just across on your right and my room is at the far end of the hall. Take what you need from the

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dresser in the corner, and once you're all good ta go, meet me in the kitchen. I've got the oven going and she's the warmest room in the house."

"Um, alright." Martin said, perplexed. "You trust me enough to let me snoop around like that?"

"It ain't snooping if ya do just as I told ya. I already told ya where everything is so there's no need for ya to be lookin' anywhere else. Besides, there's no virginal daughter up there that I gotta worry about you laying your mitts on. No hidden treasure I gotta worry about you thieving. I'm an old man with very few secrets left ta worry about you digging up. You just go and take care of yourself and meet me in the kitchen. I'm more worried 'bout burning my supper right now than I am of leavin' ya unsupervised."

The old man turned and made his way back to the kitchen. The icy cold eating away at every pore on his skin ended Martin's appraisal of the farmer and got his feet moving.

The farmhouse had an odd smell to it, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and it assaulted Martin's nostrils as he made his way along the upstairs hallway. It was the musty odor of the attic currently competing with whatever the old man was cooking downstairs and Martin was caught in the middle. The lighting was dim and shadows concealed almost every nook and cranny. Cobwebs and dust covered most everything else. Martin found the linen closet and removed a towel sharing the same musty odor as the rest of his surroundings. He went to the bathroom, took off his wet clothes and dried off. The tub and toilet had rust stains and the room held no trace of an antiseptic scent. It probably hadn't been cleaned in a decade.

He found the master bedroom at the end of the hall and turned on the lamp at the head of the bed. It sat on an end table next to an old wind-up alarm clock. He saw no television or telephone. If not for the lights, Martin would have doubted the place even had electricity. He contemplated getting his cell phone when he went back downstairs, but decided against it. He figured he wouldn't be there long enough to need it. Next to the clock was a



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framed black and white photo of the farmer in his youth, arm wrapped around the slim waist of an attractive woman. Martin guessed she had been his wife. Since the other side of the bed looked as if it hadn't been slept in since the last time the bathroom was cleaned, he also guessed her to be long in the grave. The old man came from a different age and probably didn't equate housecleaning with a man's duties.

Following the old man's instructions, Martin opened the top drawer of the oak dresser in the corner and began to remove potential clothes. Remembering the man's stature, he assumed nothing would fit, but upon a cursory inspection of the garments he had chosen, the difference in their sizes turned out to be negligible. Perhaps the old man had shrunk as he aged and hadn't bothered to give any of his older clothes to either the trash heap or Good Will. He was at least a foot shorter and 50 pounds lighter than Martin. He had whispery white hair that hung below large ears that framed his weathered face. His cheeks were shallow, his eyes sunken and his skin like leather. His teeth, no doubt dentures, were stained from years of drinking coffee and chewing tobacco. Looking again at the younger man in the photo, Martin couldn't help but think the years toiling the fields had taken a very heavy toll on him. The clothes he had chosen – a pair of faded Levis blue jeans, wool socks and a flannel sweater – must have come from that period in his life since they fit much better than the clothes the old man wore now would.

Dried and dressed, Martin shut off the lamp and left the room. He made his way downstairs, only partially aware that his olfactory senses had grown accustomed to the aroma engulfing him and had begun to ignore it. As he approached the kitchen, however, the stench of cooking meat kicked his senses back into gear. His stomach rumbled in anticipation of the food he was too afraid to eat. He walked into the well-lit room and found the man standing at a wood stove, cooking on a red-hot burner. Martin morosely noticed two steaks were popping and sizzling in the frying pan instead of one.

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“Go ahead, grab a seat.” The old man said, grinning happily. “I’m almost done here. Those clothes seem to fit ya just fine.”

“It seems so.” Martin said even though the garments were a little loose around the shoulders and waist and the socks bunched up at his ankles.

“Yup,” The old man continued. “They’d just fall offa me now. I haven’t worn ‘em since time went and took a big old bite outta my ass. Not since my Charlotte passed, at least.”

“Is she the woman in the pictures upstairs?” Martin asked, trying to keep his voice calm. He kept glancing at the two cooking steaks and hoped against hope that the old man was just one hell of a hungry old bastard. His diminutive size betrayed that hope and Martin had no doubt one of the steaks was intended for him. As much as he wanted to tell his host he wasn’t interested in order to get that awkward piece of business out of the way immediately, he couldn’t find the appropriate moment. It would have only come out rudely, and since the old man hadn’t technically offered him anything yet, presumptuously as well. Martin decided to hold his tongue for the moment rather than be blunt and possibly offensive.

“I thought we had an agreement you wouldn’t go a’ snoopin’? The old man said.

“I’m sorry.” Martin replied quickly. “I had to turn on the lamp next to the bed to see what I was doing and I couldn’t help but notice....”

“Lord Jesus, calm down.” The old man said, laughing. “I was just shittin’ ya. Boy oh boy, you sure is jumpy. How ‘bout ya tell me how you came to be on my doorstep in the midst of a fierce nor’easter in the middle of the night. I’ll finish up with our dinner here while ya do so.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell, really.” Martin said, too afraid to take the opportunity to decline the meal he had no intention of eating. It didn’t matter how much his stomach rumbled. It never did. If it wasn’t something

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Martin normally ate, he probably would never try it, regardless of the circumstances.

He recounted his tale, and as the farmer predicted, the food was ready by the time he had finished. He used the opportunity to tell him about the food issues, but failed to impress upon the old man just how severe they actually were.

“Well,” the old man said after a moment of contemplation while he took the seat at the table across from Martin. “I don’t rightly agree with immigrants taking jobs away from hardworking Americans, but it sounds like this might be your fault in the end.”

“How can it be my fault?” Martin asked, glancing at the plate of food the old man had placed before him and gulped nervously.

“Well, if ya weren’t so scared a’ flyin’, you wouldn’t be here with me right now. You would be able to make it to that whatchamacallit tomorrow and a bunch more across the country as well, same as that Anthony fella. And if ya ate like a man you’d be able to go out to fancy restaurants and kiss all those folks’ asses like he does, too. Sounds like yer neck n’ neck with this fella and that’s the stuff that’s holdin’ ya back.”

“It’s not that simple.” Martin said defensively. “I’ve been afraid of food all my life. I can’t just change overnight.”

“Bullshit.” The old man said. “You can do whatever you set your mind to. Sounds corny, but it’s the truth. Besides, you said this guy’s been working with you going on three years, right? Don’t seem like overnight to me. Seems like you’ve had plenty of time to make things right.”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds.”

“Lookit me, boy. Ain’t nothin’ ever been easy in my life and I get by jus’ fine.”

The two of them said nothing after that and the oppressive silence, disturbed only by the clanging of the old man’s knife and fork against the plate as he cut his steak, seemed to drag on forever. The fact that Martin wasn’t touching his meal began to take on an importance

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of near-mythical proportions. Finally, through a mouthful of partially chewed meat, the old man spoke.

“Ya ain’t gonna touch that, are ya?”

“No, I’m sorry. I should have said something earlier.” Martin said guiltily. “I’m just not hungry, I guess.”

“You can’t fool this old fool, sonny.” The old man said, his previous mirth completely vacating his features. “Your stomach rumbled at least half a dozen times since you parked your rear in that there chair. Your brain might be tellin’ ya you ain’t hungry, but your tummy’s most definitely singin’ a different tune.”

“I’m sorry.” Martin mumbled again. “It’s just that I don’t eat meat.”

“Are ya scared of it?”

“A little.”

“Are ya one of those people says it’s wrong to eat it?”

“A little of that, too.” Martin lied, his vegetarian beliefs stemming from his phobia rather than the other way around. Claiming vegetarianism was just an easy scapegoat.

“Well, I’ve been a’ raisin and a’ slaughterin’ cattle my whole life and I don’t think I rightly appreciate you lookin’ down yer nose at me.”

“I’m sorry.” Martin said, sounding more and more like a broken record. “I don’t mean any disrespect, it’s just that....”

“Just what?” The old man asked a few seconds after Martin trailed off and it became obvious he wasn’t going to finish his thought.

“Just, well, don’t you ever feel bad for the animals? I’m sure they had much better things planned for the day than ending up as your dinner.”

“Well, none of ‘em volunteered if that’s what yer gettin’ at. But I couldn’t afford to keep ‘em all if some of ‘em weren’t feeding me in return.”

“If you weren’t going to eat them you wouldn’t have had to breed them in the first place. Do you know what I mean?”

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“Boy, I don’t think even you know what you mean.” The old man said. His face, which had been devoid of emotion since the mirth fled, took on a cold, sinister look.

“Don’t you think it’s just a little unfair that they have to die?”

“No.” The old man replied curtly. “They’re just dumb animals. If anything, I think it’s more than fair since they were givin’ the time on this earth to begin with for just that reason. That’s God’s gift, given unto them through me.”

The steely look in the old man’s eyes and the harshness in the tone of his voice brought their conversation to an abrupt halt. The oppressive silence returned, growing more and more ominous with each passing second. It felt like the calm before the storm.

“So I’m gonna ask you one last time.” The old man said, setting his fork down and focusing his attention squarely on Martin. “Are ya gonna eat that or not?”

“No.” Martin said. He felt like crying. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to yourself.” The old man replied, standing. Martin’s whole body tensed up as he passed, moving towards the cabinets behind him. “Let’s see what else I got, then.”

“You really don’t have to do that.” Martin said, not turning to face his host because he was too ashamed to make eye contact of any kind. “I’ll be fine.”

“You most certainly will not.” The old man said. “You’re hungry. What kind of a Christian would I be if I didn’t offer to feed ya? To help ya? Ah, yes, this should help indeed.”

*God, Martin thought. Please let it be something I eat. I couldn’t bear to go through all of that again.*

It was the last thought running through his mind before the wooden rolling pin crashed into the back of his skull and knocked him unconscious.

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### 5

Martin swam out of the darkness sometime later and it took his eyes a moment to acclimate to his gloomy surroundings. He was in a small, dimly lit room immediately recognizable as being the cellar. It was crammed with boxes and items that, amazingly, were dustier and older than the relics upstairs. Within seconds of realizing where he was, he also realized how dire the situation was as two things simultaneously caught his attention.

The first was the manacle with a short length of chain clamped around his right ankle shackling him to the thick water pipe at his rear. Secondly, and more disconcerting, the old man, sitting on an overturned milk crate a yard away, was staring at him and smiling.

“Good morning, sunshine.” He cheerfully said, oblivious to the insanity of the situation he had concocted. “I was starting to worry you’d be out for hours and your food would get cold.”

His attention drawn to it, the third thing Martin noticed was his uneaten plate from upstairs resting on the dirty ground between them. There was also a knife, fork and a jug of water. *Or poison*, Martin thought. *Who knows just what this crazy fuck has planned for me?*

“What the hell is going on?” Martin said, trying to maintain a degree of authority in his voice. “Let me go. Now!”

“Let me guess.” The old man said, chuckling. “If I let ya go you’ll promise not to tell anyone about what happened here, right? That’d make you a jerk, wouldn’t it? Not lettin’ the authorities know about the crazy hick who chains people up in his basement? Who knows how many other people would stumble into my elaborate flytrap? How many lost souls would weigh on your conscious then? Or maybe they wouldn’t, which would make me even less conflicted with this sudden turn of events, ‘cause instead of a jerk that’d make ya a heartless, selfish bastard. But you don’t have to worry about that. This is my gift to you and you alone. You can leave whenever you’re ready. And when that time comes, you won’t want ta be calling

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the cops, no siree. You'll be wanting to thank me aplenty. Me n' the lord."

"I'm ready now! Let me go!"

"I'm sorry; you're not quite ready yet. But in time you will be."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Martin screamed. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"My Christian duty." The old man said in all sincerity.

"What?"

"You came to me out of the storm needing help and by golly I'm gonna give it to you." The old man explained. "It might have appeared to you that the help you needed was a tow, but it runs much deeper than that. God delivered you to me so I could help you with your life, not just your car. Teach a man to fish and whatnot."

"What are you talking about? How are you supposedly helping me by chaining me up in your basement?"

The old man didn't answer verbally. He stretched out his leg and lightly tapped the plate of food with the tip of his foot instead.

"Jesus Christ." Martin said, exasperated.

"Don't blaspheme." The old man admonished, loosing some of the joviality in his voice. "You've got problems, kid, and I'm here ta make sure you get through 'em. These fussy eatin' habits gotta go. I ain't no shrink, but I'd bet the farm it's messin' up yer life in a whole lotta other ways than just losin' out to that wop you work with. It's a fear and ya gotta conquer your fears if you're gonna live the life God has planned for ya. He helps those who help themselves, so they say. But in this particular case I think He might be wantin' me to lend ya a hand."

"What do you want from me?" Martin asked. He felt on the verge of tears and desperately didn't want the old man to see him cry. To see him weak. Although he hoped he was wrong, he had a strong feeling where this was going and it horrified him.

"I'm here ta give ya a little nudge in the right direction. I told ya you could leave when you're ready and

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I ain't no liar. When you overcome your fear of food and prove it to me by eating that steak there, you'll be free to go."

"You're crazy." Martin said.

"Maybe so, but you'll be a better person when all is said and done, I promise. Like I said, you'll be thanking me. And singing the Lord's praise, too."

"Not fucking likely, you maniac."

"We'll see."

The old man, grunting as his arthritic joints strained, stood to go and Martin's anger quickly turned to fear.

"Where are you going? You can't leave me alone down here!"

"I figured you'd like some privacy." The old man said, slowly ascending the stairs. "It's gonna be hard for you to get through that steak. You might gag, you'll probably cry, and I imagine you won't be wanting an audience for that."

"For the love of God let me the fuck outta here!" Martin began to scream hysterically.

"It's for the love and will of God that I don't. Like I said, it's up to you."

Martin uttered an anguished cry as the old man climbed the stairs and slammed the cellar door shut behind him. It left Martin alone with nothing more than a number of horrible decisions to make, eating the steak being only one of them.

Martin screamed until his voice was hoarse. He risked drinking the provided water to sooth his burning throat after concluding it couldn't be poison. The old man seemed too crazy to do something so simplistic. The pain in his throat temporarily alleviated, he tried to focus on his escape. The cellar offered little in way of tools and any boxes he may have searched in for something to facilitate his release were all out of his limited grasp. There was the fork, but after many failed attempts to pick the lock of the cuff clamped around his left ankle he abandoned the idea.



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The fork, like the knife left next to it on the plate, could be used as a weapon if the old man got too close, but the odds of that happening were slim. Like the water, the old fart had gone through too much to be so careless. But Martin held on to the idea and the hope nonetheless.

There was no point in using the knife to cut through the manacle or his ankle. It wasn't sharp enough to saw through steel or bone. He didn't even bother entertaining the notion. Having worked with corpses on a daily basis, he knew he would need something far sharper and more powerful than the cutlery left behind.

Turning, he grabbed the thick water pipe and attempted to wrench it free from the wall. If he could do that, he could slip loose. But the pipe only budged, and grudgingly at that, an inch at best. It was less than required to slide the chain off. There was less hope of it coming free than there was of severing his foot. But he kept at it for another quarter of an hour; not caring if the loud clanging it produced reverberated throughout the entire house. The old man wasn't stupid enough to think he wouldn't attempt to escape.

After 15 minutes, sweating and breathing heavily, his muscles turned to rubber, Martin finally gave up. He could see no way out of the situation. No way save for that the old man had left him.

Looking at the steak on the plate, Martin tried to visualize eating it. The thought scared him as much as being chained up in the lunatic's basement did. *Jesus Christ, his mind rebelled. Eat the fucking thing and get out of here! What the hell's the matter with you? Are you so stubborn, so amazingly stupid, that you won't even try? Try, God dammit!*

But he couldn't. His throat constricted and his gag reflex began to quiver at the mere thought of putting even a forkful of the steak into his mouth. He started to weep. The sweating and heavy breathing continued, no longer borne from his exertions with the water pipe, but by an oncoming panic attack. The only way he could make it subside was to tell himself he didn't need to eat the steak. Would never have to eat it. All he had to do was wait. The farmer wouldn't let him die. Couldn't let him die. He was

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an overzealous hillbilly, yes, but not a homicidal one. He couldn't be.

*Could he?*

Martin pushed the question away with his mind, and with his foot, pushed away the offensive plate of food. He had decided. He would wait. After all, things couldn't get any worse.

*Could they?*

Martin had resumed screaming and it was an hour before the old man finally responded. Grumbling, he had opened the door of the cellar and slowly made his way down the short flight of steps.

"Jesus, son, you're yelling loud enough to wake the dead."

"Please," Martin said. "Let me go."

"You haven't touched your steak, so no. And I'm sure it's gotten cold by now. Gonna be even harder to eat than it was before. You shoulda thought about that."

"I'm not going to eat it. I'm not going to eat anything you give me. You might as well just let me go."

"Nothing doing." The old man said, bending over cautiously, staying out of Martin's reach as he picked up the plate of uneaten meat. "You know the rules. You can scream all you want to, as well. Ain't got no neighbors on either side of me for miles. My friend Jim comes by on occasion to play some crib, but he ain't expected anytime soon, so don't start thinking he'll be coming to your rescue. No sir, the only person who can help you now is you. We'll see how you do tomorrow."

The old man left and Martin briefly considered continuing to call for help. He chose not to. The old man was probably telling the truth and all of his vocal exertions would lead to nothing but a destroyed set of vocal cords. It was best to conserve his energy. With the exception of the small French fry and bag of chips he had picked up at the truck stop, he hadn't eaten anything for days.

He was starving.

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Martin awoke the next morning. At least he assumed it was morning. In the cellar, there was no way to gauge the passage of time. He was trapped in near-perpetual darkness. Even if there had been any windows to let in sunlight, they would have more than likely been buried under a foot of snow from the storm that had stranded him there in the first place. On the floor in front of him, two pork chops rested on a plate with the same knife and fork as before. The jug of water had also been refilled while he drifted on the waves of unconsciousness.

The old man, again on the overturned milk crate, was unabashedly rubbing his crotch through a pair of dirty overalls. In his hand was an old, ratty copy of HUSTLER.

“Oh, you’re up.” He said, sensing Martin staring at him. He stopped rubbing himself and closed the magazine. “Ready to give it another go?”

“Go to hell.” Martin seethed.

“Not likely. You’ll come around.” The old man said. “I know you must be dying of hunger. It’s only a matter of time before we conquer this fear of yours and you can go on with your life. And it’ll be as a better, more complete, person. A man. To see that happen, I can wait. Patience is a virtue, after all.”

“I’m sure God doesn’t look so fondly on stroke mags, though.” Martin said bitterly.

Inspecting the pornography in his hand, the old man laughed.

“There sure ain’t nothing wrong with enjoying the Almighty’s work in all of its naked glory, son. Even if so many of the purty parts is all silicone. In fact, you look like you could use a little pick-me-up more than me right now. Have yourself a look. It might spark your appetite.”

The old man tossed the rolled-up magazine on the floor next to the water jug as he left. Martin stared at the food, and like before, pushed it away with the tip of his foot. The idea of eating it nauseated him. After a few minutes, out of boredom more than anything else, he picked up the copy of HUSTLER and started scanning its

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pages. He tried to masturbate, but couldn't maintain an erection.

Frustrated, he threw the magazine away.

On what Martin could only guess was his third morning of incarceration (or was it the fourth?), the old man brought him a plate of chicken fingers.

"Look, son, its chicken. It tastes like nothing. Or everything, depending on your point of view. Besides, the little bastards were deep fried so they shouldn't seem any different than French fries. You like French fries, don't ya? You should be able to eat these no problem. Lord, ya have ta, you're wasting away right before my eyes."

It was true. In the last couple of days Martin had lost at least 10 pounds. He had always been relatively skinny before; now he looked downright unhealthy. The farmer's clothes barley clung to his ever-emaciating body. His lips were dry and cracked, his skin pale and his eyes bleary and bloodshot. He barely had the strength to lift his head and make eye contact with his tormentor.

"What do you care?" He asked, his weak voice barely audible.

"What do I care?" The old man reiterated. "I care a whole helluva lot, young man! I'm doing this for your own good."

"No, you aren't." Martin said, his voice dropping another couple of decibels. "You only care...."

He continued talking, but the old man could no longer make him out. Placing his withered hands on his hips for balance, he leaned in a little closer.

"What? I can't hear ya."

"I said you only...." Martin began, his mouth continuing to form words long after his throat stopped producing any sound.

The old man leaned in even closer. His feet were so unsteady he almost fell onto the knife Martin had kept concealed behind his back and produced with a quickness belying his current physical state.

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The old man had retrieved the plate of uneaten pork chops before replacing it with the chicken fingers. Since the new meal was a finger food, he hadn't noticed the cutlery was missing. Martin had kept it hidden, continuously lowering his voice to lure his captor closer. When the old man was within striking distance, he drew out the weapon with every intention of driving it straight into the hick's sternum. Everything had been going as planned until the old man, already off-balance, was startled by Martin's sudden movement and fell forward, landing on Martin's left side just shy of the tip of the knife. Martin had known the element of surprise would buy him only a second with which to launch his attack. He had planned on simply thrusting the weapon into the target before him, but now, with the old man to his left, he had to reach across his body to try and stab him that way. How that would have gotten him free was beside the point. The old man may have the keys with him, but this desperate act was based more on the vengeful desire to see him scream and bleed rather than aiding in his escape. By the time he repositioned the knife in his hand and swung his arm around to strike, the old man had rolled off of him and made it to safety just beyond his reach.

"God dammit." Martin said, lacking the energy to scream it.

The old man, lying on his side and clutching his chest where it had collided with Martin's bonier-than-normal shoulder, panted heavily. Sweat was pouring off of his brow, stinging his eyes. He struggled to his feet, and after a rather severe coughing spell, managed to speak in between deepening breaths.

"You... ungrateful... son of a bitch." He managed to rasp. It was supposed to come out angry, but in his winded condition, was far off the mark.

"Fuck you, you crazy bastard." Martin said, the vehemence matching the tone the old man had been striving to achieve, but failed at.

"I'm trying... to help you." The old man continued. His respiration wasn't improving. In fact, it was getting worse. "God... put you in... my care... to help

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you. But I can't... do it on my own. You need... to do your part."

"Fuck your help and fuck your God." Martin said.

The old man clutched his chest tighter. If Martin had been looking for a weakness to exploit, he had found it.

"Watch... your mouth... son." The old man stammered.

"You and your God can go to hell. No God would condone what you've done here. It's sick and sadistic and anything but holy."

"It's... help."

"It's torture!"

The old man, his breathing more and more frenetic, tried to make his way to the overturned milk crate to sit down. The sweat on his face ran in rivulets now, steadily dropping from the tip of his bulbous nose. He squinted his eyes, trying to keep it out, and his vision impaired, didn't realize he had stumbled back into Martin's range. Martin did not fail to notice the proximity, however. With a feral snarl, he swung the knife and slashed the old man's thigh. The gash sent a spray of crimson across the dirty ground.

Uttering a shriek that was prematurely cut off due to an already diminished air supply, the old man collapsed to the floor, his flailing arms knocking aside the plate of untouched chicken fingers. The side of his face hit the packed earth hard, and if it hadn't been for the increasing pain in both his chest and thigh, would have undoubtedly knocked him unconscious. He moved to reach for the bleeding wound, but a sharp, intense pain in his chest forced him to bring his right arm up to cradle his numbing left.

"Oh my God." He muttered. "I'm... I'm having a heart attack."

Martin howled with glee. If he could have seen his reflection in a mirror at that moment he would have been shocked to discover that he now appeared more insane than the farmer ever had at any point during his forced

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confinement. Some manic force possessed his eyes and spittle flew from his frothing mouth.

“Good, ya God damned psychopath!” He shouted, the high pitch in his voice matching the height of his mania. “Where’s your God now, hunh?”

“Please...” The old man said, his movements already slowing and his eyes starting to cloud over. “Please... help me.”

“Sorry, you know the rules.” Martin said, the insanity on his features replaced with a grim determination that was reflected in the cold tone of his voice. “You’ve got to help your fucking self.”

The old man ceased his ineffectual pleading. He didn’t even bother to start praying. For his last moments on earth, he appeared to turn his focus inward, perhaps relishing all that had gone right in his life or regretting all that went wrong. Martin hoped it was the latter, beginning with the old man’s decision to chain him up in the first place.

And all of a sudden, as the knowledge of his predicament resurfaced, Martin no longer wanted the old man to die. He was trapped in his basement with no means of escape. He was in an empty farmhouse in the middle of nowhere with nobody the wiser. If the old man died he would surely starve to death. He was already more than halfway there. The irony of the situation was not lost on him, and if he wasn’t so acutely aware of the danger he was facing, it may have been enough to push him beyond sanity and into a realm of madness he’d never be able to claw his way out of.

“Wait, please.” He said to the old man’s now immobile form. “Don’t die. Breathe slowly. Calm down. I’m sorry. Please, God, don’t let him die.”

But the old man already had. His heart had pumped its last agonized time while Martin was hoping the last thoughts coursing through the old man’s mind were of regret. They weren’t. They were of his late wife, Charlotte, and how he was thankful to finally be reuniting with her in a warm embrace.

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It didn't take long for Martin to realize the old man was no longer breathing. But he still reached out with the tip of his foot, and with trepidation, began to prod the body for any signs of life to be sure. He found none. The old man was no longer his captor. He was a corpse.

"Oh my God." Martin whispered. "What have I done?"

Everything became a blur after that. Growing weaker with each successive moment, Martin drifted in and out of consciousness. Hours seemed to pass in moments as his mind, on some train of thought or another would slip into a fugue state only to reemerge and continue on as if hours had not passed. Other times, mere moments seemed to stretch on forever.

At some point, it ceased to register to him that he was sitting in puddles of his own urine. His stomach was far too empty for the production of any feces. Although the hunger gnawed away at him, he was not dehydrated. When the old man had collapsed on the floor, his right foot came within inches of the full jug of water, but hadn't sent it sprawling across the room like the plate of chicken fingers. Martin giggled as he thanked God for small favors.

After what could have been hours or days as far as Martin could tell, he finally decided that in order to survive he would have to eat those chicken fingers, no matter how much he didn't want to. Mustering what reserves of energy he still could, he climbed onto the old man's corpse, stretching the length of chain at his ankle as far as it would allow. Reaching out, he was still a foot shy from grabbing the nearest piece. He tore a section of fabric off of the old man's shirt, tied it to the end of the fork and unsuccessfully attempted to lasso it. This little task exhausted him and he quickly slid back into unconsciousness. When he awoke, ready to try again, he could find no sign of the spoiled food. Through the gloom, he could make out the beady eyes and twitching whiskers of a number of thieving rats. Without thinking, he weakly threw the fork and shirt across the cellar at



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them. They scattered, but soon resumed sentry over their next meal.

Martin was by now so drained, the idea of being devoured by rats hardly fazed him. It took a long moment for him to realize they weren't looking to him as their next prospective dinner, but at the corpse by his feet. The realization that he could also partake of that meal came more quickly.

It also shocked him back into unconsciousness once again.

He awoke some time later to the disconcerting sounds of scratching feet and the tearing and chewing of flesh. It took a while for his eyes to adjust to the horrific scene on display before him. In fact, everything remained somewhat blurry as his body was redirecting what energy it still had to more vital organs and bodily functions.

He could see the rats swarming over the old man's decomposing corpse. They pulled at the skin of his cheeks and neck, at the exposed skin on his back through holes gnawed in his shirt, drinking it all down by lapping up the small puddle of blood that had collected around the mutilated thigh or seeped from fresher wounds.

"Get out of here." Martin said, trying to scream, but barely whispering. His throat was parched. The rats hardly noticed and none of them fled. They only scurried off a short distance when he kicked the body a number of times. They stopped and watched from a position just beyond Martin's reach, waiting for him to slip into unconsciousness again before they resumed consuming the last bit of his food supply.

"Goddamn bastards." Martin said, leaning forward and covetously laying on top of the old man. Rigor mortis had set in and the body was cold and stiff. The skin was a ghastly gray and the eyes, still wide open, nothing but milky cataracts. The tongue had slid from the mouth and Martin noticed, with only a minimum of stomach lurching, that the rats had already devoured a few inches off the tip.

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With his own tongue, Martin licked his lips, dragging it across the dry, cracked skin that felt like sandpaper. He grabbed the jug of water, which was starting to run low even though he had been frugally conserving it, and took a swallow. The lukewarm liquid coursed down his throat and awoke the hunger that had, for the last little while, been dormant.

Without thinking and never taking his eyes off of the staring rats, he cut a patch out of the old man's overalls with the knife he had thankfully not thrown at them earlier.

"Go on, git." Martin said, addressing the rodents that circled him. Drool formed at the corner of his mouth and dropped onto his chin. It dangled and swung back and forth like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. Coupled with the vacant look in his eyes, he bore a striking resemblance to any of the patients at Bedlam, sans straitjacket. "Git yer own food. He belongs to me."

With a hand trembling more from weakness than trepidation or fear, Martin sunk the tip of the knife an inch into the old man's left buttocks. There was little blood, most of it having already collected in the lowest part of the body, the stomach and upper thighs that rested on the dirty floor. Martin tried to cut out a square of flesh an inch long by an inch wide, but cut a jagged, misshapen triangle instead. He removed the knife from the wound and implanted the section of loosened meat on the tip of the blade. He slowly raised it towards his mouth.

"Yum, yum." He said, either to himself or the rats that sat watching expectantly.

His jaw muscles were so unused as of late they were barely up to the task of chewing the spongy, cold flesh. When Martin tried to swallow what he had managed to masticate, he gagged and spit it out. As he coughed, a brave rat scurried across the floor and snatched away the upchucked meat.

"Fine, but that's all yer gonna get." Martin mumbled, leaning forward to carve up another portion of the old man.

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But it wasn't the last. He coughed up three more pieces the rats were able to claim for themselves before he was finally able to keep anything down.

But after that, even with a shrunken stomach, he was able to finish a full meal.

Over a week later, when Jim, the old man's cribbage partner, stopped by for a game, he discovered the grisly scene in the basement and could only stop screaming long enough to phone the police and paramedics. It was days before he could speak again and months before he could get a nightmare-free evening of sleep. Even though he was the reigning hot dog eating champion at the annual town fair and the only person in the county to ever finish the 32 ounce steak challenge over at Dixie's, the ghastly image of Martin's gaunt form led him to swear off meat for the rest of his days.

Jim would recall, with vivid clarity, hearing the grunting coming from the cellar. He remembered descending into hell and discovering his friend's body and the... *thing* defiling it. Martin was stick-thin, every bone visible beneath his grimy, slightly translucent skin. He had removed his shirt and slashed away most of the jeans the old man had provided him. Stained boxers and dirty socks had also been discarded. He sat on the dirty floor completely indifferent to his nakedness. His skin was stretched taut over shrinking muscles and minimal fat. His face looked more like a skull, with piercing eyes set in deep, hollow sockets. Dried, dark-red blood ringed his mouth and was splashed across his chest, collecting in the ridges formed by his protruding ribs.

When Jim discovered him, he was voraciously eating a slab of the old man's thigh muscle with both hands as if it was a piece of corn on the cob. Sensing Jim's presence, Martin raised his head to stare at the interloper in his lair and hissed.

Over three quarters of the old man's body was gone.

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Martin spent a month in the hospital suffering from malnourishment. Every doctor and specialist who studied his case was surprised it wasn't more extreme. Dr. King, his primary caregiver, theorized that he had actually been starting to put on weight just before his rescue. He was fed nutrients through an IV tube for the first two weeks and then, having regained some strength, was able to manage semi-solid and solid food for the final two. Everyone was also surprised that he passed every battery of psychological tests administered from almost the first to the last day of his recuperation. The smart money had been on his having gone stark raving mad. With little left to do for him, the hospital discharged Martin and left him in the care of his parents. He spent another two weeks with his family until, claiming he had unfinished business that needed tending to, returned home.

Everyone at Straub Funeral Home was glad to have him back; Riker Straub because he was a decent, generous man and Anthony Di'Angelo because he had been promised the business during Martin's absence anyway. He didn't actually care about the horrors his colleague had just endured. He was glad Martin was back because he looked forward to firing him the minute the old man kicked the bucket and couldn't protest the unfair dismissal.

Martin seemed fine with all that had happened while he was away, however, and to show there were no hard feelings, organized a dinner party at his house. When the night came, only he and Riker Straub were seated at his oak dining room table enjoying the meal he had prepared.

"I sure am glad you're okay, Martin. We were very concerned about your well-being."

"Thank you, Mr. Straub." Martin said, taking a sip from his tumbler of wine. "That means a lot to me."

"And I'm very sorry that things turned out the way they did. I needed to name a successor and Anthony was there. I'm sure you two will get along just fine, though."

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“I have no doubt.”

“Speaking of Anthony, I’m surprised he didn’t show up tonight.”

“As am I.” Martin said innocently. “I’m sure I told him of the change in date.”

“Well, it’s his loss.” Riker Straub said, twirling a generous amount of spaghetti onto the tines of his fork. “This meat sauce is marvelous.”

“Thank you very much.” Martin said, smiling ghoulishly. “It’s an old Italian recipe.”

“It’s simply to die for.” Riker Straub said, popping the food into his mouth and savoring every last ounce of it.

“Isn’t it just?”

**THE END**

## **Tale #4**

### **2 Birds**

Dylan watched in confusion as his older sister gave her boyfriend a blowjob in the backseat of the battered Ford. He was confused by the tingling sensation in his groin and the fact that no animals were involved. He was only 8-years old, after all. He had no concept of what was transpiring in the car parked just a few meters below his bedroom window of the family's sprawling, but decrepit, farmhouse. He had heard his parents fighting about the shenanigans his sister and fella would get up to and in most cases animals were always involved. His mom, more concerned about the family finances and the lack of food on their table, repeatedly told his father there were more pressing matters to concern himself with than 'those two love birds and what they may or may not be getting' up ta'. His Pa couldn't get past the fact that they were 'fuckin' like jackrabbits', and even worse, 'prob'ly doin' the doggie' too'.

That night, lying in his bed and staring out his window, Dylan saw no birds, jackrabbits or dogs. When the clouds passed, however, he caught glimpses of his sister's pale breasts in the moonlight. Whenever they came into view, the dark areolas of her small nipples visible even at this distance, the strange, confusing tingle would spread throughout his groin again. He quickly discovered that if he touched the private parts down there it felt, however inexplicably, really good.

Although he didn't fully understand what he was 'getting' up ta', he intuitively knew it was wrong and would warrant a date with his old man's belt if he got caught. But as long as he could hear his parents fighting downstairs he knew he was safe. And his parents were likely to fight for a long time.

Dinner that night had, once again, consisted of a few bruised and overripe fruits and vegetables from their small garden and dwindling fields. They hadn't had any hamburger or chicken, pork chops or steak, in a very long

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time. His Ma was pissed, his Pa defensive, and the fight escalated. The horn honking outside announced the arrival of his sister's beau and pushed the fight into overdrive. She left the table without being excused and Dylan fled to his room while his parents continued to shout at each other downstairs.

And they had just stopped.

A sudden, heavy silence fell over the house and Dylan quickly retracted his hand from beneath his pajama bottoms. He was positive his dad would burst into his room at any second. He would hear Dylan's quickened breathing, see the sweat on his forehead and the small bulge in his pajama bottoms and know right away what he had been doing. Then Dylan wouldn't be able to sit for a week.

But his father never came. After a few minutes, Dylan heard the screen door open and watched as his father stormed around the house, making his way towards the parked car. He viciously banged on the hood and yanked open the back door. With the interior dome light on, Dylan could now see that both his sister and her boyfriend were completely naked. They tried to conceal their nudity as Dylan's dad continued to shout at them, his voice muffled by the new storm windows installed last fall before the farm went belly up. They were a necessity then, but would be considered an extravagance now.

The tingling sensation in Dylan's groin was replaced by an overall sensation of excitement and dread. He knew something was going to happen and he knew it wouldn't be good. His dad tried to yank the boyfriend out of the car, and when he failed to manage that, climbed in on top of him. But before doing so, he reached down and grabbed a large stone from the culvert next to the back tire. The car began to rock, only much less rhythmically this time than it had been before Dylan's dad climbed in. When the clouds next passed from the face of the harvest moon and illuminated the scene below, a large streak of crimson had splashed across the inside of the rear window.

As the car settled on its axles, Dylan heard his mother's approaching footfalls on the stairs. He quickly

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moved away from the window and slid under the blankets, feigning sleep. By the time she opened his door, picked up the dirty clothes for the next days laundry and kissed him goodnight on his damp forehead, the car was no longer parked outside.

Finding the nights activities at an end, Dylan no longer felt the need to fake it and fell asleep for real.

A pleasant aroma coming from the kitchen awoke him early the following morning. He rolled out of bed, and on his way downstairs, looked into his sister's room. She lay on her bed, mouth agape, a thin strand of drool linking her mouth to the pillow. She was still naked, her pale skin sporadically covered with what appeared to be dark red splotches of paint. Her breathing was haggard and her eyes were glazed over just like his mom's got when she took her 'medicine'.

Although intrigued by the scene before him, the fragrance wafting up from below drew Dylan away from her room and into the kitchen where he saw an even stranger sight. His parents were sitting at the table, drinking coffee and orange juice, laughing and smiling and generally being more cordial with one another than Dylan had seen them since a blight coupled with the economic downturn crippled the farm. They smiled at each other as if both of their problems, for the time being, were behind them.

Dylan's eyes were drawn to the large spread on the table and his stomach rumbled loudly.

"Go ahead, son." His father said proudly. "Dig in."

Dylan sat down, grabbed a fork and started loading up his plate.

On the table between him and his happy parents sat many dishes of hot, delicious meat.



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**Slice N' Dice  
Part VI:  
Bad Things  
Happen  
to Good People**

## **The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

*For John Carpenter, Wes Craven, Sean S. Cunningham  
and the late Bob Clark, who started it all.*

### **Cut Scene 1**

It is the end of the season and Camp Hill is deserted. Truth be told, Camp Hill hasn't officially opened its doors to the public in more than a decade.

The few cabins still standing are in a severe state of disrepair. Doors hanging loosely from hinges desperately clinging on for dear life. Shattered windows offer entrance for all forms of woodland creature. Dusty, cobweb-coated rooms provide a modicum of shelter in which they can rest, shit, die and rot. Lice infected mattresses sag into rusted, warped springs. Maggots crawl in and out of what food is left in the kitchen and upon the abandoned plates and cutlery in the lunch hall. The dock teeters and rocks against even the slightest waves and more than half of the wooden planks comprising its 4-meter stretch into the murky lake water are missing. The lifeguard stand has toppled over and all of the canoes have large holes in the bottom resembling gaping wounds. The archery range is almost non-existent, only a handful of targets remain. A large oak tree, or perhaps it is pine, bisects the Arts and Crafts building, struck and felled during one of the intense lightning storms that seem to plague the area every Labor Day weekend.

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It would take tens of thousands of dollars to get the place up and running even remotely to code and more than an entire season to accomplish the task. No one has tried to do that in over half a decade.

Yet every couple of years more people come. Usually teenagers looking for a place to party and screw, choosing to ignore the local legends or coming because of them. Camp Hill is the last place most of them will ever see. If legends are unsubstantiated stories and nothing more, the near 200 bodies removed from this site in the past 20 years, a slim number of them with all appendages intact, belie the point. Why the locals continue to try and ward off the visitors or trespassers with campfire tales instead of cold, hard facts is open to debate. Perhaps they don't know any better and simply reiterate tales told to them by their peers. Perhaps they crave publicity, notoriety and the secret wish for a larger, bloodier body count than last year. Perhaps it is the only role they'll play in yet another massacre and they want to be memorable enough to ensure a spot in the inevitable sequel.

The legend surrounding Camp Hill (a.k.a. Camp Death, Camp Hell, Camp Slice and Dice) is in truth fact, as the corpses and eye witness testimony of the rare survivors attests to. And as already stated, every few years another group of young, lively, attractive teenagers dare to take on

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the legend of the Labor Day Lunatic. Some may survive, but most of them will not. Even now, as they climb into a rundown van, someone, something, is waiting for them.

And the thing is bored.

It is bored and lonely. It sits alone on a tree stump, a gigantic, hulking, masked monster. It pays no attention to the many flies circling and occasionally landing on its massive form. It rests it's glistening chin on an upturned palm while playing with the handle of a crimson stained machete, incessantly spinning the blade in a circle. The blunted point of the weapon has already dug a hole in the dirt at it's muddy feet an inch deep.

The thing sighs. God almighty it is bored. Bored and lonely. Although capable of comprehending more than just dismemberment, it still persists in slaughtering every soul that steps foot on the grounds of Camp Hill, souls who could potentially alleviate that boredom and loneliness. It just continues to sit and wait to do what it does best. To do all that it ever does. Maybe someday it will all come to an end. That's all it wants now.

Sighing again, it fails to notice the bird that passes overhead and generously shits on it's slumped shoulder.

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### Cut Scene 2

"That was *The Real Thing* by the band FM. You're listening to the Darkest Side of the Night and I'm your host...."

Gavin Johnson barely hears the DJ's prattle, even though the volume of the small radio is turned almost all the way up. It isn't to drown out the sound of his neighbors screwing loudly. He barely registers the sighs, moans and occasional yelps of pleasure that come from next door. The radio is more for show, to remind his neighbors, those of the loud lovemaking and all the others, that no, he hasn't died, not just yet. There is no need to call the police or knock on his door either out of concern or curiosity. The rent will be paid on time as always.

However, even if there were no radio, no one would have felt the need or desire to just stop by and check up on him, no matter his minor celebrity status in the building. Neighbors. Police. Nobody ever bothers to knock on Gavin's door because everyone knows that Gavin Johnson is batshit loony. Sitting alone in his cramped, one-bedroom apartment, surrounded by piles of true crime books, ratty furniture and paint flecked walls covered with hundreds of yellowed newspaper clippings, he looks less than well-balanced. Even though he is a grown man nearing his 60's, he wears an old, tattered Camp Hill Camp Counselor t-shirt (the red and white lettering now

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faded to the point that the garment reads **C mp H l mp Co sel r**) that barely fits. It is tight across the shoulders, with torn seams, and his plump stomach protrudes from the bottom and hangs slightly over his waist. The matching red and white striped shorts leave little to the imagination as well.

Gavin cares as little about his appearance as he does about the radio program (now blasting out the Felony track *Animal*). For the past two decades, Gavin has cared for very little. His is a singular obsession. He doesn't concern himself with how the rent is paid (a paycheck is dropped off to the landlord's office once a month by a kindly Christian old lady who lives on the first floor) or where the money even comes from (a deposit made into his bank account twice a year by the city of Timber Falls, to be made in perpetuity until his death, awarded to him for saving the lives of a couple of campers and a town sheriff 15 years ago) or how a box of food appears on his doorstep every Friday afternoon (the aforementioned Christian neighbor).

Gavin cares about one thing and one thing only - Labor Day. The radio and newspaper helps mark the passage of time, but even without them he would know. Through some form of instinctive intuition he'd be aware that September has rolled around once again and with it the strong possibility of more death and bloodshed. He was there when it all

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began, after all. And although no one ever openly blamed him for the carnage that has happened since, he still feels he is directly responsible. After all, it had been his job to protect the children 40 years ago. He had lied in his interview and said he was taking night classes at the nearby college. He told them that come the fall he would complete the few remaining courses and receive a recognized certificate in youth guidance counseling. He said he'd be a perfect fit for their camp. In actuality, he had been spending his nights getting drunk with his best friend Rex and discussing who in their graduating class had the nicest tits. He actually saw the job as nothing more than a way to earn extra cash to buy a used car to take fellow counselor Pamela Nelson to the drive-in theater over in Russellville for the possibility of some passionate necking or, if he was really lucky, some dry humping and a hand job. He had lied in his interview and now, 40 years and over 200 bodies later, he is racked with guilt. And the hand job? He never made enough money that summer to afford the car and Pamela Nelson got a hatchet in her pretty face.

Ever since the killing spree resumed 20 years ago, Gavin has spent most every Labor Day weekend in the small town of Timber Falls (one year, following a tip, he followed 'the monster' to New York City, but it turned out to be an imposter and a total waste of his time). He always



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rents a small room at Betsy's Bed-and-Breakfast (now owned and operated by a nice Asian couple, Betsy having been decapitated years ago) and spends his days and nights roaming the grounds of Camp Hill, trying to scare away anyone who is there and protect those who fail to heed his warning. He has a lousy track record. Sure, there was the Sheriff 15 years ago, and the young brother and sister duo just recently, but the numbers, the bodies, don't stack up in his favor.

As the radio starts blasting Pseudo Echo's *His Eyes*, Gavin stands, slips out of his old camp T-shirt and shorts and changes into his only other wardrobe, a frayed and moth-eaten suit purchased in the 1970s. Regardless of the facts surrounding Camp Hill, most people fail to listen to him, writing him off as a raving lunatic past his prime. The suit is his attempt to be taken more seriously and professionally (although he never did get a certificate in guidance counseling or in any other discipline). Slipping the familiar and useless handgun into the pocket of his long overcoat (he has shot the monster over 760 times, burned it four times, drowned it three times, hacked at it with it's own machete twice and even hung it once), he grabs the wallet from his nightstand and makes for the door. Outside, a cab is idling, waiting to take him to Camp Hill yet again.

He pauses momentarily and turns to the small radio, shutting it off

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for the first time in almost a year. He doesn't need the constant racket to remind everyone that he is indeed still alive and well. Everyone who knows Gavin Johnson knows that for Labor Day weekend he has important business to conduct elsewhere.

### Cut Scene 3

We've already been introduced to our supporting characters as they passed and ignored a hitchhiker on Route 9. As the vibrant teenagers clamor out of their van, it is the first time the monster, breathing heavily from the concealment of the nearby woods, sees their smiling, laughing faces. He eyes his next batch of hapless victims with the same lack of interest the local butcher affords the new shipment of meat. There are seven of them in total. Unlike some of it's other senses, both it's hearing and eyesight (at least in the one remaining orb) are up to the task of watching the prey and overhearing their inane conversations. They are of so little interest to it at present moment it actually takes stock of the van instead as it provides their only means of escape.

The rusting behemoth doesn't look like it will last the upcoming winter season, perhaps even their planed long weekend getaway. To be on the safe side, it will still disable the vehicle by simply smashing the engine to bits. It could be subtler

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(in another life the thing would have made a great mechanic), snipping valuable wires and cutting the essential fuel tubes with such precision that none of the kids would be able to detect any noticeable fault with the van. But the monster is never subtle. For some reason unknown to itself, he needs them, or whichever one will be left come the end, to immediately know they are trapped when, trying to make their escape, they pop the hood and discover it's handiwork.

A shrill laugh catches the thing's attention and it shifts it's focus back to Camp Hill's seven newest arrivals. The laugh came from Goth-rocker chick Nancy and her similarly clad in black and equally face painted and pierced boyfriend, Rod. He just goosed her while she was leaning into the backseat and removing her small travel bag.

"Hand's off, asshole." She says to him without even a trace of playfulness. "Not after the way you were eyeing little Miss fake titties the whole way here."

"Chill out, baby. It doesn't matter where I get my appetite as long as I eat at home."

"Pig."

God, the thing may actually enjoy killing these two. But not yet. Their time will come. It will more than likely happen during or just after they have sex. It'll decide when the time comes; improvisation offering

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one of the last few thrills of it's now near annual rampages.

As the Goth couple continues to argue, a black kid named Brady, wearing an Alice Cooper T-shirt and bobbing his head to the muted hip hop emanating from the ipod clipped to his belt, walks past and pays them little attention. The thing knows that he'll be one of the first ones to go. Black ones always are. Or at least they used to be. Now they just tell jokes.

"Hey Brady, how's it going? Long trip, hunh?" The whinny voice of Henry, the fat kid, doesn't penetrate the sonic wall of hip-hop and Brady walks past without answering his questions or acknowledging his presence. The thing is not surprised. There is always at least one harmless loser in every group that no one seems to care about. Perhaps ironically, it's always his (invariably the loser is male, unpopular, unattractive and unlaidd) grisly demise that elicits the most emotional response. For that reason alone the thing places Henry a little higher up on it's mental food chain.

"Hey, Lori, long trip, hunh?"

"Fuck off, Henry." Lori replies as she walks past, making her way towards her chosen cabin. Recently referred to as 'little Miss fake titties' by Nancy, Lori is a 6-foot tall, 34 Double D'd high maintenance bitch. Her out-of-state driver's license lists her age as 18 years, but she looks closer to 30. She is a friend to no one and the thing can't

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understand why there's always one like her in every group. She is a little higher on his planned pecking order, but not until she gets naked. They always have to get naked first.

Rounding out the seven is the one it would like to kill now, but will probably end up going after last. It'll be able to knock off everyone else without being detected and with relative ease, but for some reason when it comes time to gut Shauna Parker, she'll no doubt end up leading him on a good 30 minute chase through the woods and get a couple decent licks in as well. With her is her annoyingly tolerant, patient and unbelievably handsome boyfriend (anyone that good looking would, in real life, be a pretentious, self-serving asshole). The thing sighs and listens with growing boredom to a snippet of their lame and forced exposition.

"I just don't know, Johnny. I don't think we should be here, is all. I feel bad about lying to my dad." (Translation: 'I'm a prude, chaste cock-tease who's gonna outlive the rest of you.')

"C'mon, Shauna, you need to lighten up and have some fun. It's the last long weekend before school starts back up." (Translation: 'Dammit, bitch, all I wanna do is fuck.')

"I know, it's just that I don't think it was a good idea to tell you guys about this place. My Dad says..."

"Your Dad isn't here so don't bother yourself with what he says."

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Anyways, do you really think you could have talked Nancy and Rod out of coming? They spent last summer in Death Valley and the previous winter break in Waco, Texas. They live for this shit."

"Well," Shauna says, trying to salvage something of her original argument. "You shouldn't have brought along Henry. He's too innocent for this kind of place."

"Hey, he's my dorm mate. I couldn't have come without him. Plus, you brought along your dorm mate, Lori of the she-bitch clan."

"I had to bring her along. She showed up early at Dad's because I volunteered to help her move her stuff onto campus next week."

"You know what they say about nice guys finishing last, Shauna."

Groaning, the thing can't help but disagree. The nice ones always DO finish last. Rubbing the back of it's head reflexively, remembering not too fondly where a goodie two-shoes bitch implanted the sharpened blade of an axe a few years ago, the thing, having seen all it needs to, turns and leaves. It's always the same, anyways.

Stalking through the thick foliage, it is tempted to question why it just doesn't kill them all now. It would be easy and quick and offer little or no danger. But it can't do that anymore than it can just let them live happily ever after. Although not of it's own making, there are certain rules and conventions it has to adhere to. The most basic being that it kills

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on Labor Day (once, after the night that ended with the aforementioned axe in the back of the cranium, it awoke in the nearby hospital, and although technically the day *after* Labor Day, went on another murderous rampage, slaughtering most of the nurses and doctors on duty. In it's defense, most of them *were* wearing white). These rules and conventions also dictate that it dispatch them separately (or as a couple if in or in post-coital bliss) over the course of a long, bloody night. Not within five minutes of their afternoon arrival.

It adheres to these guidelines almost religiously, although in the end it actually could care less how it all goes down. Once, perhaps long ago, there might have been a vague, contrived reason for these terrifying tantrums, but now, after so many years, it is just the way things always play out. At least it keeps it from being eternally bored. Plus, barring any unforeseen circumstances, the one person it even remotely considers a friend will show up sooner or later, spouting prophecies of doom and evil. The thing always looks forward to Gavin's arrival. It always puts a smile on it's crooked, grotesque face.

But for now, it has work to do. Reaching the dilapidated shack in the woods that it calls home, it begins gathering up the tools it will require for the evening. Along the way, on Route 9, it attacks and kills an anonymous hitchhiker.

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And it does so viscously.

### **Cut Scene 4**

Sheriff Parker has work to do. Actually, he has work to avoid. Gavin Johnson has arrived, as if by clockwork, making his usual proclamations and prognostications of doom and disaster. After the Sheriff traditionally rebukes him, Gavin leaves the small, one-celled station house to no doubt check into his usual room at Betsy's B and B two blocks over. Even though the Sheriff awoke this morning knowing that sometime before the end of his shift the crazy ex-camp counselor would darken his doorstep, the visit still leaves him with the beginning of a headache that no doubt will grow into a full-fledged migraine by the time he sits down to his reheated TV dinner in front of the boob tube later that night.

"He's here, Sheriff, in those woods. He'll kill anyone who dares enter that campground tonight. To him it is sacred and hollowed ground never to be trespassed. If anyone is out there they will encounter a soulless evil that doesn't have ears for bargains or cares for pleas of mercy. Murder and mayhem, Sheriff, that's what you can expect to come from Camp Hill tonight."

Blah, blah, blah.

The Sheriff has been listening to this loony's talk for the past 15 years and it gets more and more



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irritating each time. The city council may have no compunctions about paying the geezer every six months for once saving the life of his predecessor, but that doesn't mean he has to believe him.

He does believe, however, because he's not an idiot. The semi-annual body counts attest to the fact that Gavin knows what he's talking about. The Sheriff summarily chooses to dismiss these claims as nothing more than the ravings of a senile old man not because he's an idiot, but because he's a coward.

Gavin might have been able to save the life of Timber Falls' Sheriff 15 years ago, but that didn't stop the Labor Day Lunatic from tearing the Sheriff before him in half and depositing the remains in the lake. If Sheriff Parker admitted his belief in the maniac's existence, he would be duty-bound to accompany Gavin into the woods, and more than likely, not survive the night.

No sir, he has a small pension and a daughter in college to think about. He can't afford to get chopped up by some masked, undead delinquent in the woods. It is much easier and far safer to play the belligerent, disbelieving small town hick cop. No one will fault him for that. No one will say he wasn't doing his job because he failed to heed the warnings of a man universally considered to be a charlatan at best, no matter how often and accurate his ramblings are. It's the role everyone expects him to

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play, anyway. He had specifically told Deputy Saxon to wait before leaving to investigate who has been knocking down Old Man Ralph's picket fences in order to have an eyewitness to his encounter with the former camp counselor for just this reason. Plausible deniability would ensure that, come tomorrow morning if a death toll had to be tallied, he'd still have a job, and like Gavin, continue to receive his paychecks from city council.

Now that Gavin is off on his crusade and the Deputy dispatched to see about the fences, the Sheriff takes two aspirin from the bottle in his desk drawer and slowly begins to massage his aching temples. The headache is going to get worse before it gets better. Thank God Shauna and her hot, very fuckable dorm mate are heading back to campus early this year. He is slightly worried that the piece of shit van her friends are using to help her move may crap out on them, but that is better than having her anywhere near Timber Falls and Camp Hill on this night of all nights. Looking at the clock, he mentally starts counting down the hours before he can go home, lift the phone off of the cradle and not be disturbed for the rest of the evening.

### Cut Scene 5

The monster's initial observation is correct; the black kid named Brady is the first to go. Well,

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if you didn't count the nameless, uncredited hitchhiker, that is. And really, who ever does? Now, from the darkness of the forest, as it watches Nancy and Rod screw (which will no doubt not last any longer then half a minute), it recalls how it knocked off the youth. Brady had been walking the circuitous path around the lake, smoking a joint and listening to gangster rap on his ipod (the closest Brady ever got to the ghetto was watching *Boyz in the Hood* and *Menace II Society* on DVD in the comfort of his parent's fully furnished basement). The masked monster watched him for a few moments, stealthily, although the music had been so loud and Brady so stoned it could have started doing jumping jacks on the path behind him unnoticed. And if it had in fact been detected, Brady would probably have just offered it a hit off of the fat doobie smoldering between his fingers anyway. Kids were just dumber than they used to be, it seemed. Or at least more clichéd.

But the kid didn't see or hear the monster when, in a deep, gravelly voice, it said 'Loud enough for ya, kid? Here, let me turn it up a notch'. Reaching forward, the thing grabbed Brady by the head, and with two grimy, dirt-encrusted thumbs, drove the ipod's earphones deep into his skull until each encountered the pulpy gray mass that was, up until that moment, Brady's fully functioning, however high, brain.

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Releasing it's death grip, the monster let the young man's body unceremoniously drop to the ground. It stepped over the unmoving form without a second thought and continued searching for more victims. It wasn't long before it came across Nancy and Rod, half naked and in the process of fumbling foreplay, deeper in the woods.

Now, watching and waiting for them to finish, it wonders what was with that 'loud enough for ya' comment. The monster can remember a time when it would say little or nothing at all, and in it's own humble opinion, was much more frightening. It used to also just give the victims a nice, quick hack or slash or cleanly broken neck. Now it seems to have to dispose of them with some witty (or apparently witty) quip, in a fashion personally suiting the individual target. Rock star gets a guitar to the face. Jock a javelin through the torso. *Jesus*, it muses. *When did this become so much like work?*

Returning it's attention to the task at hand, the thing watches as the two Goth-rockers conclude their lovemaking in a climactic finish for Rod and a fake orgasm for Nancy. Although it has just watched two young and attractive people get naked and screw, the thing is in no way aroused sexually. It is barely aroused homicidally. It can't remember the last time it masturbated let alone got an erection. If it's memory is correct, it's been almost a decade

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since it's even seen it's own genitalia. The thing (the thing's thing, that is) must be a disgusting, shriveled mess by now, and the monster prefers to not know what became of it during the intervening years.

It had given up removing it's clothes years ago too and now, whenever it needs to expel any waste, simply does so in the confines of the ragged, tattered mechanic's overalls it wears. There is no vestige of a nose left on it's masticated face so it fails to recognize exactly how bad it stinks. How the two teenagers only a few yards away from it fail to smell the reek of dirt, piss and shit wafting from it's oversized body is beyond it. It would love for the two doomed kids to realize that there is something out of the ordinary going on around them on their own, without having to open it's mouth to unleash another volley of idiocy.

But that isn't the case. Hefting the rusted steel cross it tore off of the chapel steeple in town, the monster crashes out of the forest and into the clearing with Nancy and Rod, it's large form blocking any means of their possible escape.

"Hey, death heads." It groans.  
"Meet its harbinger."

And they do. Screaming.

### Cut Scene 6

At this moment, even though Gavin knows that somewhere on the

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grounds of Camp Hill young people are being murdered, he isn't in a hurry. He isn't unsympathetic to their plight; he just knows all too well how the game is played. If he were to go out there now there'd be nothing he could do. He would stumble around in the darkness and come across scenes of slaughter too late. He wouldn't make his customary, hopefully beneficial for those left, appearance until the end of things. For now, he resides in the comfortable confines of his room at Betsy's B and B, thoroughly engrossed in *Between Moons*, the latest novel by Michael Brooks. He takes his first tentative sip of the won ton soup provided by his most gracious and humble Asian hosts, smiles and keeps on reading.

### Cut Scene 7

As originally surmised, the thing let Henry live a little longer than the others and waited until Lori got good and naked. Incidentally, the recently deceased Goth-chick Nancy was wrong in her assessment that Lori's endowments were anything less than authentic.

Lori had been at the lake skinny-dipping when Henry took her clothes. To him it was a joke, a harmless prank, and most importantly, a means by which to start a conversation with someone, anyone, even a bitch like Lori. Since they had arrived at Camp Hill, everyone, even

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his dorm mate, Johnny, had systematically ignored him. After attending to the growing tension in his groin while watching Lori strip and then swim, he decided that taking her stuff might be a way to break the ice. At the very least it'll keep her naked longer. He scooped up her clothes and proceeded to hide them among a group of bushes that, unbeknownst to him, was only a few feet away from the monster. It had watched the girl get naked, then Henry masturbate to the sight of her and finally the theft of her skimpy garments. It was about to make it's move when Lori discovered her clothes were missing.

"Hey, which one of you perverts stole my stuff?" The bitchy tone was still present in her voice, but being naked, alone and in the woods at night was sufficient enough to make her somewhat humbled. "Hello? Is anyone out there? Is anyone gonna answer me, or what?"

Cautiously, Henry did. He stepped out from the trees and bashfully handed Lori back her clothes. As she struggled to climb back into them while offering up the least amount of nudity possible, he had the courage to make a juvenile yet ineffective pass. His bravery was rewarded with a slap in the face and the comment that she wouldn't touch him with a 10-foot pole.

The thing let Lori leave and made a mental note about the 10-foot pool comment, knowing it would come in

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handy later. For now, it continued to watch Henry. The fat kid cried for a while (an unnaturally long while, actually) before finding solace in the dozen or so chocolate bars he dumped on the ground from the backpack he had converted into a portable convenience store.

Thoroughly convinced that the kid was at his lowest point and therefore in a position to elicit the most sympathy, the monster advanced. Muttering something about how the candy would be sweeter than that bitch ever could be, it rammed the dozen or so chocolate bars into Henry's gaping mouth. The boy struggled for as long as he could, gasping for air as the milk chocolate filled his throat. He was dead by the fourth bar. His skin turned blue and his neck ballooned like an inflated inner tube. The thing left the corpse to drool in the dirt and set off in search of Lori.

It found her further along the lake, washing her hands in the calm water. As it approached, she mistakenly took it for Henry and was, as they always were, apologetic. And as always it was too little, too late. One last attempt to make the jerk's demise tug a little harder at jaded heartstrings. The thing had discovered that, for some reason, the people who need to be loved the most are often the ones who are the most incapable of giving it. Not having the time or inclination to talk philosophy, the monster crashed through the nearby branches, brandishing the not quite



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10-foot pole it intended to jab through Lori's natural chest.

Lori screamed, and as to be expected, fled frantically, waving her arms to get anyone's attention. The woodland creatures of the night paid her only a passing interest before returning to their nocturnal search for food. They weren't on the thing's menu tonight.

The monster advanced on her slowly, walking purposefully, not breaking out into a run until she was further down the path and it was out of her sight. Why it couldn't just run her down was one of those stupid rules and conventions that the thing had come to expect and blindly follow. It used to run, but now not so much. When no one was watching it sprinted through the woods for a few minutes and came out further along the path in front of Lori, as if miraculously or supernaturally as opposed to simply knowing the shortcuts.

She had been looking behind her, running blindly, and tripped over a root that had sprouted up along the path. Scraping her knee, she got back up, blubbering and crying hysterically, and then ran into the wide, waiting chest of the unsympathetic thing as it blocked her way. Whimpering, kneeling at the monster's feet, Lori began to incoherently beg for her life.

Rolling it's one good remaining eye, the thing sighed heavily, shrugged it's massive shoulders and used the pole it had been carrying to

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impale her to a tree. It didn't even bother wasting it's foul breath saying anything witty or ironic. Hopefully the blatant sexual irony wouldn't be lost on anybody.

And now it stands wondering what exactly to do with her and the body of Henry back yonder. It would much rather just leave them behind and finish the task it has set out on, but can't. That would be too simple. It wrenches the pole free and Lori's body slumps forward onto it's shoulder. The thing slowly starts back towards the camp, making sure to stop and pick up Henry's asphyxiated corpse as well. It's progress somewhat hindered by the body's slung over it's shoulders; it stumbles a couple of times and falls once.

It ponders where to deposit the bodies so that they can be quickly discovered later. Believe it or not, this stage of the evening's program is always more difficult than any of the actual killings. It had once spent a good 45 minutes on it's hands and knees toweling up sticky pools of blood and righting toppled furniture so the heroine would pass unsuspecting through the cabin to the upstairs floor where it had stashed all of her dead friends. The girl didn't go anywhere near the cabin and the thing had to continually readjust the chase to force her there. It had been as if she were a mouse in a laboratory maze that needed a little bit of coaxing to get to the cheese.

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The thing completes the task of hiding the corpses and heads back towards the shack in the woods it calls home. It has at least an hour before the prude and her jock boyfriend realize something is wrong and set out to investigate.

Closing ceremonies are nigh at hand and the Labor Day Lunatic wants to be ready.

### Cut Scene 8

At Betsy's B and B, Gavin methodically chambers six rounds into his handgun and slips the weapon into the pocket of his overcoat. In the other pocket he slides the bottle of whiskey he has been using to chase the won ton soup. He doesn't know it, but the bottle will come in handier than the firearm. For now, he brings it along to help warm his bones against the cool, early September winds. He confidently places a bookmark in the Michael Brooks paperback, intending to finish it during the cab ride home tomorrow, positive he'll survive this night as he has all the others, even when it originally appears he hasn't.

Shutting the light off behind him, he begins the trek to the grounds of Camp Hill.

### Cut Scene 9

In the shack, the masked monster is carefully sharpening it's pride and

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joy - a machete - against a sharpening stone. For the past 20 years the thing has always brought it along to end the evening of carnage. That most of those nights end with it's apparent demise doesn't alter it's belief in the talismanic properties the weapon may possess.

Even monsters need good luck charms. Perhaps tonight will be the night where things will come to an end once and for all and it will finally be able to rest in peace.

### Cut Scene 10

In a small townhouse in the center of Timber Falls, Sheriff Parker is fast asleep on the couch before the flickering light of his television. His hand is buried deep in the waistband of his pants while on the screen women in skimpy bikinis advertise a 900 number by prancing and playing on the soft sands of some far off beach.

All in all, the Sheriff has had a very productive evening.

### Cut Scene 11

By dawn the next day, the remains of the thing are barely more than a pile of smoldering ash. Those who survived left hours ago and the clean-up crew has yet to arrive. For the time being, the pile of ash and bone is alone, and also for the time

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being, still conscious. But already it can begin to feel the last threads connecting it to the corporeal world beginning to fray. If the monster had any lips left (or a face, for that matter) it would have smiled. After all these years it appears as if it will finally get the rest it so desperately craves. As it waits, it reflects.

Shauna and Johnny had been searching the campground, trying to locate their wayward companions when the monster showed up. Rain had begun to fall and they clung together for warmth. Even under the circumstances the horny Johnny was trying to cop a feel, albeit in a surreptitious manner so as to be able to deny doing so later. A crack of lightning illuminated their surroundings and revealed to their startled eyes the sight of the masked monster, machete in upraised hand, standing in front of the unused barn it didn't want them to enter as no bodies had been placed within its walls.

Shauna screamed and Johnny panicked. Although it looked as if he were moving protectively between Shauna and their would-be assailant, he had actually been trying to knock her over to buy himself some time to make a clear getaway. The monster allowed him to retain his dignity by foiling the escape plan before it could come to cowardly fruition. It hurled the machete, piercing Johnny's back between his shoulder blades, the bloody tip tearing a hole in both his

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shirt and chest as it appeared on the other side. Clutching for Shauna weakly, he fell to the ground at her feet and she screamed again.

The monster began to make it's way towards the fleeing girl, stopping to retrieve it's favorite weapon. It placed it's boot against the back of the still living Johnny's skull and drove him face first into the muddy ground. Wet earth filled mouth and nostrils, and even though the wound in his back would have proven to be a fatal blow, the young man suffocated instead. While the body was braced to the ground, the monster easily removed the machete from it, the act of which caused a slight sluicing sound that inexplicably could still be heard above the noise of the heavily falling rain.

The thing caught up to Shauna a few minutes later, but not until she had stumbled upon the lifeless forms of all of her friends in a nearby cabin. Taping a reservoir of strength and agility only the virginal seem to possess, she was able to postpone her death by hurling a number of objects at the monster. The one that finally felled the thing was a lamp she smashed against its masked face. It didn't hurt, but she was the hero and it was time for the thing to take a dive.

Playing by the rules, the thing, lying apparently inert on the floor, waited until Shauna had passed almost completely over it before reaching out and grabbing her exposed ankle. She

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screamed and flailed and it dutifully released it's strong grip. It knew the chase wasn't over; Gavin had yet to arrive.

The thing waited, watching from the cabin window, as Shauna tried and failed to get the van to start. It chuckled to itself as she cursed loudly upon discovering the destroyed engine under the hood. Some things never change. And as that thought passed through it's simple mind, acting almost as an invocation, Gavin, breathing heavily, appeared on the scene.

Unlike her dead boyfriend, Gavin actually was trying to protect Shauna as he stepped between her and the monster lumbering out of the cabin. It smashed through the door, creating a shower of splinters, for dramatic effect. It easily could have just used the doorknob. Also for effect as opposed to any practical purpose, Gavin unloaded the contents of his gun into it's chest as it moved towards them. It staggered, but didn't fall, as they both knew would happen. Nobody bothered to stop and wonder how six bullets failed to fell the monster when one smashed lamp temporarily did the trick.

God, the thing had missed it's friend. Knocking the old camp counselor to the ground, it raised the machete high above it's head, but hesitated on delivering the killing stroke. It would have hesitated all night if it had had to, incapable of bringing itself to kill Gavin just as

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Gavin was incapable of ever stopping it. If Gavin had bothered to actually finish any of his night courses, or if he knew even the most basic concepts of psychology or literary constructs, he would have known what the monster did - they comprise two sides of the same coin. It represents chaos and disorder while Gavin, believe it or not, represents rationality. They could no more destroy each other than one could readily destroy one's self.

But the thing didn't have to stand waiting, weapon at the ready, for too long. As Gavin had fallen, the bottle of strong whiskey rolled out of his coat pocket. Unseen by the two combatants, Shauna had somehow gotten a piece of fabric torn off of her shirt into the neck of the bottle and discovered a Zippo lighter, heretofore unseen, seemingly out of nowhere. She lit the fabric, and shouting 'Chew on this you ugly sonofabitch', threw the Molotov cocktail against the thing's dense body.

The monster went up in flames, taking a few steps back to make sure it burned Gavin as little as possible. It felt no pain at all and was thankful that, while it had been waiting in the cabin, the rain had stopped. It didn't want anything to douse the flames of its possible salvation. The monotony of its existence, the rampages that had become so routine and predictable, the lack of any companionship or purpose had been going on for far too long now. Long past when it used to be



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inventive, interesting or even remotely fun and worthwhile. All it wanted to do was die.

Shauna helped Gavin to his unsteady feet and the two of them watched the pyre like two boy scouts on a camping trip. After a few moments shared in silence, they left for Timber Falls to report to the girl's father all that had transpired at Camp Hill that night.

And as the sun rises, the first of a number of police cars arrive on scene. As the officers begin to cordon off the grounds, the last glowing embers that were the monster turn black and somewhere far off it sighs.

For the first time in years, it's not from boredom, but of sweet relief.

### **Cut Scene 12**

In the hospital, Gavin, suffering from minor burns, rests quietly, a bowl of won ton soup on the nightstand next to his bed. Shauna, already discharged, and her father, had come by his room just moments before to say their thanks and goodbyes. The Sheriff, rather guiltily, had refused to make eye contact with Gavin, choosing instead to inspect the machines monitoring his condition. He told the old camp counselor he would be back later that afternoon to take his statement.

Gavin has no intention of accusing the Sheriff of any negligence. If the monster rears it's

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ugly head again, it may be beneficial to have the Sheriff in his debt. But for some reason he doesn't think the potential ally will be necessary. Either by instinct or intuition, he feels a certain crossroads has been reached and the Labor Day Lunatic has finally been stopped.

Gavin hesitates as he picks up the Michael Brooks novel his Asian hosts brought along when delivering his soup. These books tend to end on a down note, and recalling that the last chapter he had read before making his way to Camp Hill had ended on a high one, he is unsure if he wants to continue.

Smiling, he sets the book aside, unread. For once, he feels he is deserving of a happy ending.

### Cut Scene 13: Alternate Ending

That night, as Sheriff Parker sleeps on the couch in the living room, his daughter, one floor above, sleeps in her bed. The blankets are pulled up tight around Shauna's chin and we can see that she is smiling.

*Take the Time to Dream* by the band FM plays softly on her radio. A slight breeze from the open window billows her blue curtains. A soft caress against her cheek disturbs her slumber. Turning in bed and opening her eyes slowly, the smile on her face grows wider as she beholds the grinning face of her boyfriend, Johnny, who is very much alive.

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"Hey, baby." He says.

"Hey. How did you get in here?"

"Your front door's unlocked and your dad's asleep on the couch. I snuck past him easily. He's not much of a cop."

Shauna giggles as Johnny slips under the covers with her. They begin to kiss and he moans loudly in pleasure.

"Shhh," Shauna admonishes him. "You'll wake up my dad."

"Don't worry, bitch." Johnny says, his angelic voice turning deep and coarse in mid-sentence. "No one's waking up tonight."

Before her horrified eyes, Johnny's features melt away, revealing the monstrous visage of the Labor Day Lunatic. The mask is gone and all of it's features are on grisly display. The right side of its scraggly-haired head is caved in, the brow barely concealing the not-so-empty eye socket. Where the eye should be, a mass of squirming maggots slither and crawl, some of them falling out and onto Shauna's clean sheets. A wall of pulpy flesh covers the space where a nose might once have been. It's cracked lips curl around crooked, yellow teeth and a green, slimy tongue rolls out of it's mouth.

In her nightmare, Shauna screams and the monster cackles. In the real world her body is torn to bloody pieces while, one floor below, her father sleeps peacefully.

## **THE END**

**Intermission:  
“Do you want to  
hear another one?”**

Stan finishes reading, lowers the book and looks at his daughter. She appears to be asleep, but to his trained eye he knows she's faking. Her eyes are shut too firmly, almost as if she's squinting against the bright sun. She doesn't have the shallow respiration of someone in a deep slumber, but is holding her breath altogether, as if she's playing dead instead of feigning sleep.

As he watches her, there comes a light tapping on the door. Anne opens it and pokes her head in without saying a word. She places her hands together as if in prayer and rests them on her chin, silently asking her husband if their daughter is asleep. Stan shakes his head in the negative and raises his index finger to indicate that he is going to be a little while yet. Anne points her own finger at him in return, a stern warning that she hasn't forgotten about the movie they watched and that he's still on her shit list. Any worries Stan might have over the seriousness of his situation are washed away when she smiles and blows him a kiss.

She closes the door behind her quietly, making her way to her and Stan's bed and a book of her own. Stan looks back at Alice just in time to catch her partially closing her eyes.

As if he is suffering a mild stroke, Stan starts to twist and contort his face into a number of silly countenances. He scrunches it up, pulling his lips back from his teeth as far as they can go, sticking his tongue out of one corner of his mouth and opening his eyes as if in a state of shock. Another face, which includes pulling the tip of his nose back until he resembles a barnyard pig, sends Alice into a fit of uproarious laughter.

“Hey, faker.” He says, keeping his nose in its upright position. “I thought you were asleep. Oink!”

“Stop being so silly, daddy.” Alice says in between giggles.

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“Are you ready for bed yet, sweetheart?”

“Not just yet.”

“Well, do you want to hear another one?”

“Yes please.”

**Subway  
Prophet: A  
Heartwarming  
Tale**

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*For Robert E. Howard, Roy Thomas  
and Arnold Schwarzenegger*

Jamie Wheeler descends the concrete stairs into the labyrinthine system of subway tunnels that crisscross the bowels of the city. Posters of missing people plaster the wall to his left while, on his right, a horde of commuters use that segregated side of the stairs to ascend into the sunny world above. In Jamie's mind, they are as lost as those static black and white headshots to his left. All that awaits them aboveground is work and traffic, timecards and timetables. Beneath it all is where one will find adventure. Here in these steel and concrete tubes where trains like man-made snakes speed to and fro as if under the command of the great God Set.

Jamie lets go of the cold, paint-flecked handrail and digs into his coat pocket, removes a subway token and deposits it into the nearest turnstile, the bar ratcheting forward to admit him into the cavernous world beyond. The terminal opens before him like a grand bazaar with newsstands, convenience stores and other assorted overpriced shops lining its walls. Shoeshine boys and early morning whores peddle their wares amidst the derelicts who, with outstretched hands, ask those who pass for money without providing a service of their own. Buskers with guitars and saxophones, open instrument cases at their feet, play for change and attempt to be heard above the screeching train cars that barrel past. Announcements are made through an outdated public address system like clockwork, the deciphering of the words from the static requiring so much concentration that most pay it little heed. Everything is tagged with equally indecipherable graffiti. Old newspapers and snack food wrappers twist about in the air displaced by passing trains before once again momentarily settling to the dirty floor.

The cacophony gives most in attendance a headache and constitutes a necessary evil as they get to and from wherever they need to be. But for Jamie, it is the highlight of his day. As he maneuvers himself to the appropriate platform to go downtown, he feels like a

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conqueror standing on the shores of Stygia, awaiting a ship to whisk him away to far-off lands with monsters to fight, riches to steal, and at the end of a long day, voluptuous bar wenches to bring him large, dirty glasses full of frothy ale.

That he is actually awaiting a train to take him to school and another day of the sixth grade is a fact he allows to enter his consciousness only insofar as necessary to navigate the real world. That he has to keep an eye out for Tommy Patterson and his gang of thugs is the greatest reminder that he is not the northern barbarian he fantasizes being. It jolts him from his reverie even more than the modern world contradicts that of the ancient Aquilonia he pretends to inhabit.

The train pulls to a hissing halt in front of him, and after surveying the crowd that has formed and seeing no sign of Tommy or any of his ilk, Jamie boards it. He has no doubt Tommy is standing amongst a similar, surging swarm of people somewhere farther along the track, boarding a similar, but different, car. However, as long as he and his friends choose to not wander, Jamie should be safe in the car he now boards. Once, he inadvertently climbed into the same car as them, and if there hadn't been a transit cop present for the entire duration of the trip he doubts he'd have made it out alive.

As the train jerks to life, Jamie takes an orange colored, vinyl-covered seat next to an obese man in a business suit which strains to contain his girth. He almost drops the book bag placed on his lap, but quickly recovers it. Dropping the bag and having its contents spill onto the grimy floor would be almost as embarrassing as having Tommy give him an atomic wedgie in front of all of the other passengers. He should know; both such incidents have happened to him on more than one occasion in the past. The fat man to his left looks down at him, but Jamie pretends not to notice. He can feel the weight of the weighty man's stare bearing down on him, and if the woman at the end of the car hadn't begun to be accosted by a group of spiky-haired, leather and chain clad gang bangers at just that moment, he may have cracked under the pressure and turned his face up to look back at the



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man with a child's guilty countenance. As it turns out, when Jamie finally does look up at the fat man to his left, he discovers he is no longer staring down at the clumsy kid on his right, but at the defenseless woman only a few feet away trying to fend for herself against a group of young men that have begun to circle her like a pack of hungry wolves. It is now the fat man who, like most everyone else in the train car, wears a guilty expression, doing nothing to intercede on the young woman's behalf.

Jamie turns his head to follow the obese man's stare and sees the thugs not as the dregs of modern society that they are, but as the red-haired raiders of northern Vanaheim. Half-dressed in animal skins, the Vanir poke and prod at the woman with the tips of their tiny daggers and the barbs of their filthy tongues, saying the most foul and degrading things imaginable. The woman, no longer dressed in modern finery, wears a sheer, almost transparent gown that flows around her lithe form like a mist. The men are salivating at the prospect of having their nefarious way with her, while the surrounding peasants fail to come to her aid. She clutches a sack of water that used to be her leather purse to her heaving bosom as if it has talismanic power. She closes her eyes, looks heavenward and utters an almost silent prayer to Mitra. As the goon closest to her lunges, the prayer quickly turns into a shriek.

It isn't the mighty Mitra who answers her call, but Jamie, the 11-year-old boy on his way to school. But he is no longer that small, frail kid. When he rises from his seat, he towers over the cowardly denizens around him. They turn their heads away in shame. His Levis have been replaced with loincloth, his winter coat changed into the furs of some beast slaughtered long ago and carelessly flung over wide shoulders. His close-cropped hair has morphed into a shoulder-length black mane. His soft, inquisitive hazel colored eyes are now a deep, cold blue. The body that he had always been so embarrassed to expose at the local pool is now rippling with massive, bulging muscles. And the book bag that had so recently almost fallen from his lap has transformed into a worn leather scabbard and is hanging from his right hip, resting

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against a thigh the size of a tree trunk. No longer are the textbooks of a timid schoolboy in it, but the hardened steel of his broadsword, forged in the fiery mountains of the north. It is stained red with the blood of countless vermin like the so-called 'men' advancing on the hapless woman before him.

Unsheathing his sword, Jamie, now in the form of the savage Cimmerian he worships, shouts to the would-be assailants. His voice is no longer soft and tentative, but a bellowing howl like that of an enraged animal. In his mind, Jamie can almost see how the word balloon and its contents above his head would be three times larger than all those that surround it, filled with exclamation points.

- How can ye cower and crouch while a lady requires your help? Cowards surround me, no doubt. But I shall answer the summons and strike down these dogs in the name of Crom, here in the underground where that great God dwell.

The savage leaps forward, his heavy blade already arcing through the air behind his head, both strong hands firmly gripping the bejeweled hilt. The Vanir men rush forward to meet him in battle, all save one who stands back, firmly holding the woman by the waist, the tip of his dagger pressed to her throat hard enough to draw a pinprick of scarlet. She has ceased her struggles, watching, awestruck, as the barbarian makes quick work of her tormentors.

Three men advance on her protector, knives raised and ready. Before any of them can deliver a single, glancing blow, the barbarian's blade slashes through the air and the head of the man in the lead is quickly severed from the neck, a geyser of blood shooting up from the mortal wound. The remaining two stop dead in their tracks, and before the first's body has lifelessly collapsed to the ground, the savage, swinging and thrusting his blade like a man possessed, renders them to their own number of individual pieces. Stepping through the lake of blood that moments before had not existed, he reaches his large, gore-streaked hand toward the trembling woman and the last of her captors.

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- Give her to me, cur, lest you suffer a fate even worse than that of your brethren.

His voice quaking with fear, the Vanir responds with faltering words.

- Worse? How can it be worse than the brutality I just witnessed?

The Cimmerian grins, a maniacal gleam in the corner of his eye.

- I could enjoy myself.

The man responds by violently shoving the woman into the waiting barbarian's arm. Thinking the savage momentarily startled, he makes one final lunge at him, his eyes glazed over with the insanity of a cornered, feral animal. He emits a loud, near ear-piercing shriek that abruptly turns into a wet gurgle as he lands upon the tip of the savage's sword. It had been raised and made to ready when the thug thought him otherwise distracted. His body slowly, sickeningly slides down the blade until his still-warm intestines come to a rest on top of the barbarian's hand. The Cimmerian flicks his wrist as if shooing away a bothersome insect. The last of red-haired raiders of the north flies off of the sword and lands in a crumpled heap six feet away.

All the while, Jamie, in the fantasy guise of his fictional hero, never takes his eyes off of the damsel clinging to him.

- And how do you fare after all of this?

The woman looks up into his cold stare and smiles a seductress' smile.

- I will be fine now, thanks to you. How can I ever begin to repay such a noble, heroic deed?

- Ah, wench, I can think of a number of....

Jamie's fantasy is interrupted by the conductor's voice issuing from the speaker system as it announces the next stop. As the train pulls to a halt, the woman he imagined saving quickly disembarks, and with no one bothering to stop them, the men that had been harassing her soon follow. It is not until the doors pneumatically close behind them that the remaining passengers in the car breathe a collective sigh of relief. The opportunity to do

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the right thing now gone, they feel less guilty about their own inaction. They try to tell themselves that it is nothing more than a mere coincidence that the men left at the same time as the woman. They try to fool themselves into thinking she'll be fine, not raped or worse. And should her face soon grace one of the countless black and white photos of other missing people that adorn the walls leading into the subway system at 5<sup>th</sup> and 10 and everywhere else all over town, they'll pretend that no, it must be another woman, not the one they just saw, even though the similarities are indeed striking. And maybe they'll believe it, maybe they won't. But in the end, they'll all just go about their business.

Jamie is just a kid. His fantasies are that and nothing more. It isn't his place to step up and show these people the correct way to behave. It isn't his fault that they don't read *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian* comics from Marvel. If they did, maybe they'd learn a thing or two about doing the right thing.

The boy's thoughts are cut short yet again, as the fat man to his left grunts in disapproval at the play that had just been acted out before them all.

- Makes ya wonder where Bernie Getz is when ya need him, eh kid?

Jamie's face contorts in confusion.

- What?

-Never mind, kid.

And Jamie can't help but think that's the problem. No one ever does.

Later, in his room, listening to the muffled sounds of his parents arguing downstairs, Jamie massages the scrape on his chin and wonders how, even though he is the victim of Tommy's cruelty on the schoolyard that day, they somehow managed to lay the blame on his shoulders. They began their rant concerned enough, asking him how the scuffle started, but soon became less concerned about how their boy may have gotten hurt and more concerned with their boy's interests and how they could blame that.

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His mother found and confiscated a number of his 'unacceptable' comics the week before, and although in no real way connected to his run in with Tommy Patterson, his being pushed to the ground, in their minds, was somehow caused by his love that dark fantasy, horror and violent pop culture. No one in the household knows of or refers to Frederick Wertham and his misguided, moralistic crusade against the comic industry in the 1950's, but his parents still follow in the shrink's misguided footsteps well enough. That Tommy is the juvenile delinquent doesn't seem to matter at all to them. As long as their son reads things like Conan, he's just as guilty.

As his parents fought, Jamie snuck up to his bedroom, and out of spite, began perusing some *Savage Sword* back issues his mother failed to discover when snooping through his room under the false pretense of 'tidying up'. He slips under the covers, pulls out a small flashlight and tries to focus on the black and white panels instead of the raised voices coming from the kitchen below.

The discussion with his parents had turned into an interrogation, and like most of their family 'sit-downs', eventually escalated into an argument between husband and wife over their careers and how neither spends enough time with their son. This lack of parental affection must, in their minds, be the cause of his sudden infatuation with all things inappropriate for a boy his age. And as always, it is the other parent's fault that it has come to this. They both work on opposite ends of town, his dad a real estate agent and his mom a receptionist at a prestigious law firm. Neither have the time to perform even the simplest of tasks like driving Jamie to and from school. Even though people have been disappearing at an increasingly alarming rate, bodies turning up sporadically with hearts torn out, getting to work early and making a good impression are more important to them than leaving their son at the mercy of the subway system and the possible real-life monster or monsters lurking in it. The papers have unoriginally dubbed the killer the Valentine's Day Slasher, as that holiday is now less than two weeks away.

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As he turns the page of the comic spread out before him, Jamie again wishes that Mr. Murphy were his real dad. His best friend Ryan's father is a true inspiration.

Jamie and Ryan have been best friends since second grade fate seated them next to each other. Over the years, Jamie has watched in envy as Ryan has been allowed to get the coolest toys to display and enjoy in plain sight while he has to squirrel away his meager collection for fear of losing it. The walls of Ryan's bedroom are covered with movie posters like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and even *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The latter sports a chainsaw wielding maniac in front of a woman hanging from a meat hook and asks the all-important question 'Who will survive and what will be left of them?' Ryan has plenty of *Fangoria* magazines, the *Slice N' Dice* cartridge for his Atari video game system and even a Michael Myers mask to wear trick or treating. Mr. Murphy drew the line at a homemade Freddy Krueger glove, and although it upset Ryan to no end, Jamie couldn't help but think his friend should just count his blessings for what he does have and not whine about what he doesn't. After all, he could have it a lot worse. He could have Jamie's parents.

A little over a year ago, during one of the rare occasions when his own father wasn't too busy to spend time with him, Jamie and his dad went to the local theater to see a reissue of Disney's *Pinocchio*. While he was waiting for his dad to buy them some soda and buttered popcorn, Jamie scanned the posters of coming attractions and was mesmerized by an Austrian bodybuilder's icy stare in the one advertising *Conan the Destroyer*. He begged his dad to take him to it even though he knew it was a lost cause. His father had refused to take him to see *The Empire Strikes Back* because it was too dark. He only made it to *Return of the Jedi* because it was salvaged by the presence of the family-friendly Ewoks.

When the Schwarzenegger film was finally released, he told his parents he was spending the night at Ryan's to watch the primetime preview of NBC's new Saturday morning cartoon show lineup. Instead he, Ryan

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and Mr. Murphy went to see the new Conan film and he fell in love. The following week he spotted a copy of the latest issue of *The Savage Sword of Conan the Barbarian* at Mr. Kim's convenience store where he often bought candy with his weekly allowance. Immediately he knew he had to have it. He started saving his quarters every week and purchased the newest issue at the beginning of every month. He and Ryan would read them together joyfully, often arguing over who would win in a fight between Conan and the Terminator, a film they had just watched on home video using Mr. Murphy's new and expensive videocassette recorder. Ryan always chose the cyborg Arnold while Jamie's devotion never wavered from his Hyborian character.

Everything in Jamie's life began to center on Conan and his exploits. And although not in the way his parents believed, even the fight with Tommy at school is no different. Well, if you want to call being pushed to the ground a fight. Jamie had been admiring Becca, a girl in his class, fantasizing that she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, his warrior flame. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts he didn't notice Tommy and his group approaching. Ryder maneuvered himself unawares into a kneeling position behind Jamie and Tommy easily pushed him over the crouched henchman. When Jamie tried to get up, Tommy pushed him down again, giving him the scrape on the chin. The torment may have ended there if Jamie's friend Ryan were bigger and braver than he is, but he's as small and timid as Jamie and dared not go against Tommy and his gang for fear of equal or worse retribution. Jamie doesn't blame him one bit.

As it happened, it took another five minutes of verbal and physical abuse before one of the teachers saw the group that had formed and dashed over to break it up. Jamie was brought to the nurse's station for treatment and Tommy to the Principal's office for a familiar reprimand. Unnoticed by the authorities, Tommy told Jamie that if he wanted to see the seventh grade he'd keep his mouth shut about what really happened. Jamie did and his parents were called in to deal with the situation.

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Thinking of his parents breaks the spell of memory and Jamie discovers two things simultaneously: the first being that he has flipped through at least 10 pages of the comic book without really paying attention, which is okay since he has already read the issue more than a dozen times, and secondly, that his father is standing just outside his bedroom door.

Jamie quickly snaps off the small flashlight and scurries out from under his covers, feigning sleep just as his dad opens the door without knocking. Mr. Wheeler begins talking before finding out if his son is even awake to hear him or not.

- Hey, kiddo, I have to leave for work early tomorrow morning and your mother has a meeting. Will you be able to get up and ready on your own?

- Sure thing, dad.

- Good. Be careful tomorrow and try to stay out of trouble.

- Goodnight.

His father closes the bedroom door and Jamie slides back under the covers to finish the comic he started. Again, he can't focus on the story. He wonders how his parents can be more concerned with his reading habits than the fact that there's a killer of real flesh and blood, not harmless ink and paper, on the loose. A killer whose lair they have no compunctions about sending him into day after day, alone and unarmed.

By the next morning, Jamie has all but forgotten the incident from the day before. He has bigger and better things on his mind. He has every intention of following his father's order and staying out of trouble, but sometimes trouble has a way of finding you, no matter how much due diligence you exercise to avoid it.

He awakes and any fears of running into Tommy, either on the way to or at school, quickly vanish when he remembers the date. It is the first Wednesday of the month, the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, and that means the latest issue of Conan hits the newsstands today. Barring any kind of



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delay in delivery, that is. He lifts the corner of his mattress and finds the small tear in the corner of the box spring beneath. From it he retrieves a small bag usually reserved for marbles, but now housing his saved up allowance. He shakes the silver coins out onto the palm of his hand and counts more than enough to get the magazine. He keeps the money hidden because his parents would have more questions then he would have fake answers if they discovered he squirreled it away instead of wasting it on candy and knickknacks like other boys his age. Shoving the loose change into his jeans pocket, he grabs his book bag from off his desk and trots out of the room.

One block away, he excitedly takes the steps down into the subway station two at a time, paying no heed to the ever-expanding collection of missing person's posters or the other commuters in his way. He bumps into an old lady, mumbles an apology and then is quickly on the move again. He crosses the station and enters the convenience store run by the very friendly Mr. Kim. Jamie always thought he was Japanese, but after getting to know him better, discovered he was from Vietnam.

Rushing into the store, he makes his way past all of the overpriced grocery items and toiletries and straight to the back where the wall of magazines is, the dirty adult ones way up top and out of reach for kids his age. No doubt his parents would like to see Conan up there as well. A quick scan of the bland faces on the bland covers that fill most of the lower racks doesn't uncover any of the familiar artwork by people like Boris Vallejo and Earl Norem. His heart starts to beat a little faster and his mouth goes dry. He looks again, even straining to read the ones above and seeing only splashes of unfamiliar pink and titles like *Hustler* and *Penthouse*.

He rushes to the front counter, almost bumping into the same old lady as before, and doesn't waste a breath to apologize to her, saving it all for Mr. Kim. When it comes, it comes in one big rush.

- Please, please please don't tell me there's been another delay or that you sold out already!

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Mr. Kim, not the greatest of actors, attempts to look confused. In his current state of frenzy, Jamie fails to notice the deception.

- What are you talking about, James? I haven't the faintest clue.

- Oh, c'mon, Mr. Kim, you know what I mean! Savage Sword of Conan issue 121! It's supposed to be out today. Please don't tell me you didn't get it yet or that you sold out already!

The old woman approaches the counter and stands behind Jamie, who has started hoping up and down as if really needs to pee. She looks impatient and unpleasant so Mr. Kim decides it best to cut the fun charade short.

- Oh, that's what you're talking about! Well, I may have some good news for you. I haven't had the time to stock my shelves yet. Let me just take a look down here and....

Mr. Kim kneels behind the counter and Jamie holds his breath. After a second the storeowner pops back up, triumphantly waving the wayward issue in his hand as if it's a white rabbit culled from the depths of a cheap, felt hat.

- Ta da! This wouldn't happen to be what you're looking for, would it?

- Mr. Kim! Careful, you're gonna wreck it!

- Many apologies, young sir. Now, would you perhaps be interested in purchasing this particular item?

Jamie literally empties his pocket onto the counter top. Lint and empty *Bazooka Joe* bubblegum wrappers are interspersed with the change.

- Of course!

Mr. Kim takes the appropriate money and leaves Jamie the rest of the change and assorted detritus to go back into the pocket from which it had come. He hands the boy his prize, and seeing the look on Jamie's face, can't help but feel a little of that youthful exuberance rub off on him as well. It radiates from the kid like nuclear isotopes.

- Now you have a great day, James. But get a move on. You don't want to be late for school, do you?

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- No, sir!

Jamie beams proudly and dashes out of the store, leaving Mr. Kim behind to deal with the old woman. She isn't pleased to have had to wait while a grown man played games with a schoolboy. And she has no compunctions about letting him know it, either.

- Kid shouldn't be reading trash like that. Not at his age. That's horrible stuff and you should feel ashamed for selling it to him.

She says this as she drops her newspaper onto the counter top, the headline telling of another body being discovered overnight, heart ripped beating from an eviscerated chest.

As Mr. Kim rings up her purchase, Jamie makes his way through the station, opening his comic to revel in the glorious black and white artwork. Ryan always says he thinks he'd like the magazine more if it was in color like the books he collects, but Jamie disagrees. How the blood drips black from swords instead of bright red seems to evoke an atmosphere more appropriate for the stories than would the usual art and color found in your average *Batman* or *Superman*.

He holds the comic open before his face like a lost tourist consulting a map, not paying any attention to the world around him. He is even more engrossed in the printed world than his fantasies of inhabiting that same landscape. On those days he is able to at least keep a small part of his brain on the lookout for Tommy and his thugs.

Today, unfortunately, it is completely absorbed in the printed plot to allow for any such much-needed attention and a hand, like a wild jungle cat swatting its prey, viscously knocks the comic from his surprised fingers. Jamie is momentarily more concerned about any damage the comic may have suffered than who could be behind the assault. His eyes scan the ground for it as the individual behind its dramatic disappearing act grabs a hold of the front of his shirt and drags him forward. Startled, Jamie looks to the person with confusion that quickly turns into petrified terror when he discovers who has a

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hold of him. Tommy Patterson stares down at him, his lips curled into a sneer.

- What'd I tell you would happen if ya ratted on me, Wheeler? What'd I tell ya 'bout seeing the seventh grade?

- I... I dunno what you're talking about! Honest. I swear!

And it's the truth. Jamie didn't tell anyone what had really transpired the day before, feigning ignorance when asked how he got the scrape on his chin. Although there were a number of other witnesses who could have told the Principal what happened, they knew better and kept their mouths shut. Tommy will more than likely get around to giving you hell at some point regardless, but no one sees any need to help speed that process along. But his reputation preceded him and he got a week of detention even though no one confirmed his guilt. And although he probably knows this, perhaps not even deep down, but right on the surface of his consciousness, Tommy still employs it as a justification for further tormenting Jamie. It's about as fair as how the powers that be decided to pass judgment on him so he considers all things rather even.

- I gotta spend the next week cleaning Mr. Mollin's blackboards 'cuz a you. Do you think that's fair? Don't ya think you deserve a little payback?

- I swear I didn't tell anyone, Tommy. I promise.

This dance can go on forever, but as he pleads his innocence, Jamie's eyes keep glancing away from Tommy's to the Conan comic in Ryder's grubby hands. He had picked it up while Tommy was accosting his latest victim, more interested in the comic than a scene he'd already witnessed countless times before performed with any number of hapless victims.

- What were ya lookin' at, Wheeler? Look at me when I'm talking to you!

And although Jamie tries, he can't keep his eyes off of the comic, almost more worried about the damage it might suffer than he himself will. Following his gaze and knowing that the best way to inflict pain on someone might not always be with fists to their stomach, Tommy

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snatches the comic from Ryder. The pages crumple as Ryder at first instinctively refuses to let go of it. Jamie winces at the sight, a reaction that Tommy also doesn't fail to notice.

-Gimmie that! So, what were ya readin', bookworm? Conan the Barbarian. Let me show ya what I think of your faggoty barbarian.

Tommy let's go of Jamie in order to grab the comic with both hands. Before Jamie can stop him, he tears it in half along its stapled center. For Jamie, the sound is louder than anything – the subway trains, the passing commuters, the beating of his own frightened heart. As the two halves of the former whole flutter to the dirty ground, he envisions himself striking out with a muscled arm, his clenched fist connecting with a loud THWACK against Tommy's nose, pulverizing it with a corresponding spray of black blood. He sees himself reaching down, picking up the dazed bully and raising him above his head, tossing the unconscious flesh onto his two henchmen. He imagines standing over the tangled heap and laughing in victory.

In reality he starts to cry.

- You dickhead!

He attempts to shout, but the words come out a gurgled whisper.

- What'd you just call me? Maybe I should do that to yer fuckin' face next, asshole.

Before he can grab a hold of Jamie again, the PA system shrieks feedback into the air and momentarily distracts him and his goons. Jamie doesn't waste the opportunity and runs. Through blurred vision, he races into the nearest throng of people waiting to board a train and is quickly engulfed by the crowd. He senses, if not sees, Tommy and his friends infiltrating the same mob just behind him. He knows that it's only a matter of time, seconds maybe, before they discover him. And although he hopes that one of the many adults around will help if Tommy catches him, he can't place his trust in their hands. Adults, starting with his own parents, have only mostly ever let him down.

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That's why, just as he spots Tommy and the others about to locate him, he follows the raspy voice that beckons him into a shadowed alcove a few feet away. The majority of people have boarded the train and there are only a few left to provide him adequate cover. Thoughts of the recent rash of disappearances are far from his mind as he contemplates following the mysterious stranger's advice to join him. As normal as it is to fear the unknown, sometimes it is preferable to a fate we know awaits us if we don't take the risk. And knowing what Tommy will do if he catches him, Jamie opts for the concealing darkness and whoever, or whatever, it may hold.

He dashes over and hides just as Tommy and his gang push through the last of the commuters boarding the train. His prey nowhere in sight, Tommy curses and punches Ryder in the shoulder as if it is his lackey's fault that the hunt proved fruitless. Jamie watches from the alcove and breathes a sigh of relief, knowing how close Ryder's shoulder came to being his face. He watches without moving a muscle for fear that any slight movement may be seen from the corner of an eye and any rustle heard by an attentive ear. Tommy and his gang eventually leave, deciding to catch up with Jamie later that day at school.

The thought that he may only have a brief reprieve from the painful fate that Tommy no doubt has planned for him sends a shudder down Jamie's spine. He still has the rest of the school year to survive, and baring his or Tommy's parents deciding to move, countless years thereafter. He groans at the thought of having to do this time and time again for the foreseeable future, or at least until Tommy has gotten his retribution and moves on to smaller, weaker prey. And since Jamie is one of the smallest, weakest kids at school, that won't be happening anytime soon. He groans again.

This time, the mysterious man who either came to his aid or lured him into the darkness for his own sinister reasons, answers the groan. Watching and waiting to see what Tommy was going to do had made Jamie completely forget his presence. As the voice begins to speak, the fear

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that had temporarily left when Tommy did returns, as do all the stories of missing people and desecrated bodies. He jerks back as the owner of the voice takes a hobbling step towards him.

- Don' be afraid, son. I don't mean ya no harm. I helped ya out with that ruffian, didn' I?

The source of the raspy voice is an old homeless man dressed in multi-layers of dirty clothes to protect against the cold. A long, moth-eaten trench coat covers a torn suede jacket which itself covers a stained sweater. They in turn no doubt conceal one or two ratty tee shirts. A pair of knee-length shorts rest above a pair of frayed blue jeans, and as seen through the holes in the knees, a pair of long thermal underwear. Two pairs of socks are on feet forcefully shoved inside a pair of *Nike's* barely held on by elastic bands. A black wool-knit cap adorns his head and a few wispy strands of silver white hair stick out from beneath it. A mismatched pair of gloves with all of the fingers cut off at the knuckles are on his hands. The exposed fingernails are filthy with grime. The skin of his face is as weathered as his attire, pockmarked and covered with what appears to be soot. His left eye is almost completely pinched closed while the right is wide open, revealing an almost colorless iris. His nose is bulbous and red. When he opens his mouth to speak again, Jamie sees his teeth are yellow and rotting.

- No need to be afraid of me, son. I know I ain't much ta gaze upon, but I ain't no Valentine's Slasher or whatnot. So, ya mind tellin' an old man what that was all about?

- That was Tommy. He's the school bully. He thinks I did something that I didn't and now he wants revenge.

- It's been my experience that bullies don't want revenge, son. They jus' want ta be bullies. I'm sure he'll find someone else ta pick on soon enough.

- I doubt it, but thank you for your help.

- Don't mention it. It's not very often that I get ta lend a hand nowadays.

- Why not?

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- Most people don't seem ta need a hand from one's who's more often than not lookin' fer a handout of their own. Speakin' a which, son, ya know I hate ta ask, but would ya happen ta have a bit of spare cash on ya for an old man?

- My dad says that if I give money to bums they'll just use it for booze.

If the old homeless man hadn't started laughing right away Jamie might have thought he had offended him. But the tears that start to form at the corners of the old man's eyes are caused by mirth, not hurt feelings. Regardless, mostly to assuage his own guilt at being so rude, Jamie pulls the remaining change from his pocket and hands it over. The old man is careful that their hands don't touch, probably ashamed of how dirty his are.

- I'm sorry; this is all I've got.

- It's more than appreciated, son. And don't you worry none 'bout what yer pappy tells ya. Sure, some of us like the bottle, but we all like ta eat, too. This here is goin' towards a nice, yummy sandwich.

Now it is time for Jamie to laugh. He does, but it is all too brief as he recalls where the change came from and what happened to his comic book. The look of grief that descends upon his features is enough to concern the old man.

- Still thinking 'bout dat bully and what he intends ta do wit ya?

- No, it's just that he tore up my comic book and I had been saving for it all month. Now I'll never be able to get it.

- Well, if it'll help, ya can have this here change back to start again.

- No, that's okay. I'll never be able to get what I need in time. My parents don't give me a big enough allowance and I could never ask them for an advance or anything like that because they wouldn't approve of how I'd want to spend it.

- They wouldn't approve of ya buyin' a silly old comic book?

- It's not silly!



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- I'm sorry. I meant no offense. Its jus' I thought that comics were fer kids, after all.

- They are. But my folks don't like me reading them. Not this one, at least.

- What comic is it, anyway?

- The Savage Sword of Conan number 121. It just came out today and that jerk Tommy tore up my copy.

- Well, I'll tell ya what. You jus' leave things to me and I might be able to help ya. You scratched my back with this here change, after all. Let me scratch yours.

- What do you mean?

- Never you mind, son. You jus' go about yer business and try not ta think 'bout things. Steer clear of that punk best ya can and come n' see me tomorrow morning. I'll be right here and you'll see that everything's okay, I promise.

- Okay.

Jamie isn't at all sure what the old man is talking about, but he's pleasant enough and did help him out of a tough jam. He doesn't think the old man will be able to help him at all, in fact he doubts if the old man will even be there tomorrow, but he sees no harm in humoring him.

- Well, I guess I should be heading off to school now.

- All right, and don't fergit, come by n' see me tomorrow and we'll have this whole Conan rigmarole straightened out.

With a backward glance toward the alcove, Jamie sees the old man wave with one hand while depositing the coins he had just been given into one of his countless pockets with the other. Jamie makes his way towards the downtown platform; sure he'll be 15 minutes late for school, maybe more. Even though he may get into trouble, that doesn't bother him. For some unknown reason, he can't help but think the encounter with the bum... the homeless man, he reminds himself... is actually the beginning of something important. Something grand. An adventure, perhaps.

And for the first time in his 11 years, the adventure may not be make-believe.

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Although not an adventure per se, the following weeks are good ones. They unfold without the slightest hint as to the devastating conclusion things will eventually reach. At school, Jamie doesn't run into Tommy because, being 20 minutes late due to his run in with him that morning in the subway station, he has to stay indoors for his lunch hour as punishment. Since Tommy has detention after school, the ride home is thankfully free of his torments as well. His goons are still around, but without their ringleader to guide them they pose little threat to anyone. In Pyhs Ed class, Tommy does try to take his anger out on Jamie during a rather heated game of dodge ball, but with Mr. Price ever-present, the whistle on the chain around his neck at the ready should things get too out of control, Jamie suffers only some minor bruising. The pounding he takes on the court should be a prelude for the main event yet to come, but by the next day Tommy is no longer around. He isn't in homeroom to answer role call the rest of the week and the entire following one. Although he is more than likely staying home ill, both Jamie and Ryan have other hopes. The former that he got transferred to another school district and the latter that a bus hit him.

- That's extreme, don't you think, Ryan? After all it's me he's after.

- Don't worry, he'll be coming to get me soon enough. I'm guilty by association, remember?

But he never does. For Jamie and Ryan, the weeks are blissfully Tommy-free. And as the days pass, even the lingering fear of his presence soon dissipates like black clouds making way for the sun. By the time Jamie next encounters him, the bully is in no position to accost anyone.

The morning after his first encounter with the homeless man, before their friendship blossoms and the disappearance of Tommy can lift his spirits, Jamie enters the subway station at 5<sup>th</sup> and 10 wearily. He worries that his arch nemesis may pop up at any moment, and as he

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approaches Mr. Kim's convenience store, the memory of the destroyed comic comes rushing back to figuratively hit him in the gut almost as hard as Tommy literally would have. At first he decides to steer clear of the establishment, not wanting to torture himself by going in to look at the issue he lost, the issue he can no longer afford. But he starts to imagine Mr. Kim seeing how forlorn and despondent he looks and envisions the old shopkeeper taking pity on him and giving him a replacement copy free of charge. Thoughts of stealing it never enter his mind. Although his fictional hero is a great thief, he's sure that even Conan wouldn't steal from those that didn't deserve it. And Mr. Kim definitely doesn't deserve it. He's one of the few adults Jamie knows who doesn't treat him like an annoying kid. Him and Mr. Murphy, that is.

As he reaches the store, still undecided whether he'll go in or not, he discovers the decision is no longer his to make as the shop has yet to open for the day. Even though the sign posting the store's hours of operation reads it should have opened two hours ago, a locked gate is still up across the front door and all of the lights inside are off.

Jamie contemplates the scene for a second before making his way to the alcove that was his sanctuary the day before. He still doubts the old man will be there, but in the off chance that he is, he doesn't want to be rude by not going when he said he would. He can't afford to be late for school again as a week of detention is his promised fate if he is, so it'll be a short visit anyway. Although the old man is as strange a stranger as he has ever encountered, and one he still feels less than completely comfortable with, he very well may have saved his life with Tommy and deserves more than a simple brush-off. If reading about a true hero, fictional or not, has taught him anything, the importance of loyalty ranks pretty high on the list.

When he reaches the alcove he finds it deserted. As he is about to turn his back on the vacant scene, the old man's voice calls out to him from even further back in its dark recesses. The raspy voice is preceded by a loud scrapping noise that indicates a doorway hidden

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somewhere deeper in the shadows. Where it goes and what secrets it holds are, for the moment, the property of the old man alone. His interest piqued, Jamie hopes that maybe someday he will share it with him. He had figured on this being the beginning of an adventure, after all, and nothing signifies adventure better than obscure passageways to other worlds.

- You made it, son. I'm so glad. I was here on time, but forgot my gift and had to rush back to where I hunker down to get it. I promised ya I'd take care of things, after all, and I didn' want ta disappoint.

- What are you talking about?

Pulling from the folds of one of his many layers of clothing, the old man removes a copy of the Conan comic Tommy destroyed the previous morning. The action reminds Jamie of Mr. Kim and goes a long way towards solidifying their new friendship.

- 'Ta da!

- Let me see that!

Jamie rushes forward and impolitely grabs the comic from the homeless man's filthy hands. The vagrant isn't the least bit startled or upset. He sees the excitement on Jamie's face and likens it to what most kids must look like when racing downstairs on Christmas morning to discover a multitude of multi-colored presents beneath a decorated tree. It isn't the look of selfish greed, but childlike wonder.

- Go on, careful now as ta not knock an old feller over.

- I'm sorry.

Jamie's apology is mechanical. He never looks to the man he apologizes to. He is hesitant to take his eyes off of the comic for fear it might vanish into thin air the way an insubstantial dream can escape one upon first waking. But it stays in his hands, miraculously in one piece. He is at first positive that it cannot be the same issue as the one just released the day before, but a back issue the old man must have found in the trash during one of his daily scavenging trips. But it's the same. Jamie's next thought is that the issue must be extremely damaged, the old man

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having picked up the pieces of his original one and taping them back together after their initial meeting. But again, the comic, minus having been rolled up in a dirty coat and then handled by some dirty fingers, is in near-pristine condition.

- By Crom.

- What's that, son?

The old man looks at Jamie, perplexed by the reference, but keeps smiling his yellowing smile nonetheless.

- Nothing. Thank you so much! How where you ever able to get it?

- I asked around extra hard yesterday fer a helping hand. Which is weird of me, since normally I don't like talkin' ta folks unless I absolutely haveta. Ya see, I'm the most antisocial person I know. Well, at least I think I am. I don't know that many people. Ha ha.

Jamie smiles even though he has no idea what the old man is talking about.

- So people just gave you money because you asked them for it?

- Well, I did ask real nice. But even then, for everyone that spared me a dime, another dozen or so just flat out ignored me. One actually kicked me! Oh well, I was able to scrounge up enough over the course a' the day, so all's well that ends well.

- Wow.

It takes Jamie almost a month of saving up his allowance to be able to buy the magazine he now holds. He is in awe that the ratty man before him was able to achieve this lofty goal in just a day. In his 11-year-old mind he can't help but wonder how one goes about being a bum and why more people aren't doing it.

- Well, I told ya I'd come through for ya an' I did. I'm jus' happy I coulda been a help to ya again.

- Well, I'd like to help you, too. Here, maybe this can do for starters.

Jamie's parents had been far too busy with work the night before to prepare his lunch for school so they left him a dollar bill in lieu of a brown bag on the kitchen table

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when he woke up. Fishing it out of his pocket, he hands it to the old man, proud that he could also be a giver, not just a taker, in their new relationship. He figures going hungry at school for the day is a small price to pay for showing his gratitude. He never could have brought himself to use the money on the comic instead of the lunch it was meant for. That would be dishonest. His allowance, however, is a different story. That's *his*.

- Why thank ya, son. It's much appreciated. And will go to good use, I can assure ya. Not on booze at all.

- Really?

- Well, maybe a bit of it will. It gets mighty cold in these here tunnels this time a year, and a nice stiff shot of whiskey will warm ya up almost as good as any ol' blanket will.

- I can get you booze, too. My dad has a liquor cabinet and I can get you some from there.

- Why, I'm mighty thankful that you're willin' ta help an old man who's down on his luck, but I wouldn't want ya gettin' inta trouble with your folks now. No siree, not at all.

- Don't worry. I'm sure my dad won't even notice. He's got like a dozen or more bottles in there and he rarely ever drinks them. Just on special occasions. It'll be all right. It seems unfair to me that he has so much and doesn't use it when you seem to need it, but have none for yourself.

-Well, son, that's jus' the way the world works. You go ahead an' see what ya can rustle up. It sounds harmless enough. But you be mindful now. I ain' supposed ta be tellin' this to no one, but I know things that even I shouldn' be a knowin'. Something's coming, and soon. Something evil. An', as much as I wish you could avoid it, the more I get ta know ya, the more it seems you might end up smack dab in the middle of it all. Keep a pure heart, son. Yer gonna need it ta weather the storm that's a comin'.

- I don't understand. What are you talking about?

- In time. On the 14th day, all will be revealed.

- Am I in trouble or something?

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- No, no. Not if ya do as I tells ya an' keep on the right side of things. I'll be there to steer you through the choppy waters, don' you worry none about that.

But Jamie does worry at first. The old man's cryptic words last with him throughout the school day and into the evening when he raids his father's liquor cabinet as he said he would. He pours a quarter of a bottle of rum into a plastic juice container, replacing the pilfered alcohol with water. As he does so, fear of getting caught replaces the fear that the old man's words aroused in him. Praying to Bel, the imaginary God of thievery, he starts to reconsider his apprehension at the old man's prophecies. Perhaps he is just having some fun with him. The old man knows he likes Conan stories and it's more than likely he read the latest issue before giving it to him and got some ideas for a fun game of make-believe. Nothing is coming. How could it be? And if there is something, how could the old man possibly know in advance? No, Jamie thinks, the old man is simply playing as a means of bonding with him. He might as well play along and enjoy himself.

For the rest of the week, Jamie continues to supply the old man with booze, food, and when he has it, money. He hands him the juice containers full of either rum or vodka and pretends it is a flagon of Argossean wine. He sees the quarters and dimes as Zamorian coins. As the days pass, Jamie begins looking forward to meeting his new friend more than he used to look forward to the school commute providing an ideal setting for his imagination to run wild. He dashes into the subway terminal each and every morning, paying little attention to the growing section of missing person's posters that now bleeds around the corner of the stairwell and halfway down the wall to Mr. Kim's convenience store. He also fails to notice that that establishment has yet to reopen. He heads straight for the alcove where he and the old man first met, and although he hopes to one day be let in on the secret behind the door from where the old man usually appears, it isn't until the end of their time together that he finally gets to experience it. Their conversations never touch on the impending evil that the old man previously

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spoke of, but focus on other things, including Conan (Jamie lends his new friend a couple of the back issues his mother failed to confiscate), school, the difference between adults and kids, baseball and their pasts. Well, Jamie's past, as the old man keeps his as mysterious as the world that tantalizingly lay behind the rusty door.

As Valentine's Day approaches, the old man's face begins to take on a more serious countenance. Although he has been starting to look healthier with each visit, a fact Jamie attributes to his providing him with food and money on a regular basis, by the end of the following week it's almost as if he looks older than he had on the day they first met. The sadness that is etched onto the old man's features does not go unnoticed and Jamie is quick to enquire about his new friend's well being.

- It's almost time, son. I had hoped it would pass us by even though I knew better.

- The evil!

Jamie's excitement is the exact opposite of the old man's sadness. He had come to visit this morning with nothing more on his mind than telling him about his and Ryan's plans to have a sleepover on the weekend. Now it seems the old man wishes to resume their game of make-believe, a game that had been all but abandoned over the past week as they had gotten to know each other better. Although Jamie had never lost interest in the door in the far corner, he had pretty much forgotten all about the evil the homeless man said was coming on the 14th day. Tomorrow. Saturday. Valentine's Day. By the look of displeasure on the old man's face, Jamie is able to deduce that a different approach, one more somber, is also necessary.

- I mean, the 14th day is upon us, isn't it?

- Yes, it's tomorrow. And I know yer excited, son, but this is serious business we're talkin' 'bout here. You're gonna be tested, I'm sure, and I need ta know that you'll be ready. Will you be ready?

- I'll do my best. What do I need to do?

- I can't tell ya till tomorrow. Now, I know tomorrow ain't a school day, but ya need to be here



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anyways. It's important that it be tomorrow. This thing, well, it's got a timetable all it's own, ya know what I mean? And late, too. You need to come here late.

Jamie almost discounts the possibility of meeting the old man's odd requirements when he remembers the plan to spend the night at Ryan's the following evening.

- I'll be here.

Jamie and Ryan have snuck out before, usually when sleeping in a tent in the Murphy's backyard, but he thinks they might be able to pull off the feat from Ryan's basement as well. He may have to finally tell Ryan about his new friendship, a fact he had wanted to keep to himself for the time being, but the prospect of finally finishing the game begun a little over a week ago makes it worthwhile. Once Ryan knows, perhaps he'll be able to join them in their next adventure.

What Jamie doesn't know is that there will never be another adventure, and what the old man speaks of is anything but a game.

The next night, out-of-earshot from Ryan's dad as they look for a movie to rent, Jamie tells his friend all about the encounter with the homeless man and the game they have been playing. They finally settle on renting *House*, and by the time it and the large pepperoni and bacon pizza they had ordered is eaten, a plan for sneaking out is made. Ryan is skeptical at first, partly because he is jealous that his one friend has gone out and found another, but also because he is scared. He reads the paper and sees the news and knows just how dangerous the city has become over the past couple of weeks. As far as Ryan is concerned, he likes to keep his fear to the realm of harmless movie make-believe. But Jamie is adamant about keeping his appointment, and in the end, Ryan is more afraid of letting him down and losing his friendship than he is of the night waiting just beyond the safety of his house.

They wait for almost an hour after Mr. Murphy retires to his bedroom, trying to pass the time by telling lame jokes, discussing the joys of life at school without

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Tommy Patterson and the always popular 'who would win in a fight between Conan and the Terminator?' game. They play on the Atari for a bit and leaf through Ryan's comic book collection. These acts usually gobble up hours in the blink of an eye on any given weekend, but they now seem dull and incapable of making the second hand on the clock move faster than a slow crawl. Jamie is nervous with excitement while Ryan sweats in apprehension.

Eventually, sensing that enough time has elapsed since Mr. Murphy went to bed, the two young adventurers leave the basement, holding their breath every time one of the steps creak and groan under their weight. They cross the kitchen, the small bulb over the oven casting the room in a crisscross of shadow, and arrive at the back door. They unlock it and leave it as such when it closes behind them to gain re-admittance later.

- What happens if my dad wakes up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water and sees the door unlocked and decides to lock it?

- He won't. If he wants some water he'll get it from the bathroom upstairs.

- What if he's hungry?

- Are you kidding me? Did you see how much pizza he ate tonight? Don't worry; we won't get locked out.

- Well, what if someone discovers the door open and decides to break in and rob us?

- Relax, Ryan, tonight's about breaking out, not in. Everything will be fine, I promise.

The pair quickly makes their way out of the backyard, wincing as the rusty gate squeals in protest of being opened at such an inappropriate hour. They dash away, making sure to keep to the side where they can easily dart into the shadows should a car appear on the otherwise deserted street. The night air is cool and crisp on the skin, and taking a deep breath, Jamie can't help but notice how smooth and almost weightless it feels sliding down his throat. He imagines it to be as sweet as the breath a convict may take after a long prison sentence has been commuted.

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The Murphy household is only a few blocks from the subway station near Brackett's Hardware Store and Jamie thanks Crom that he and his friend don't have to walk too far. As pleasant as the February night is now, it'll only be a matter of moments before it becomes downright cold. And although a few of the major busses are still running, he has no doubt that an inquisitive driver would surely report the presence of two kids out this late unaccompanied by an adult.

It takes them 5 minutes to reach the station and another 10 for Jamie to reassure Ryan that all will be okay before he agrees to continue. They have to wait a few more moments while a portly night watchman paces back and forth before moving on to inspect the bathrooms. As the door to the ladies room shuts behind him, the two boys dash to the turnstiles, deposit their tokens and run to the farthest part of the track where the guard won't be able to see them when he finishes with the lavatories. Usually a loud and busy place, the terminal is now deserted and quiet, reminding Jamie of a ghost town in an old black and white John Ford movie. Even the plastic grocery bag that blows by could be the obligatory tumbleweed. When he speaks, his voice seems so loud he fears it will echo off of the walls and alert the guard to their presence. It doesn't, but it does momentarily startle Ryan.

- Okay, we need to take the train to the stop near my place at 5<sup>th</sup> and 10. It should be by soon enough.

Soon enough turns out to be twenty minutes as the trains are now running on a limited overnight schedule. Impatiently, Jamie paces back and forth, constantly craning his neck to look down the darkened tunnel for any sight of the oncoming train. That he'd hear it before seeing its light makes little difference. Meanwhile, Ryan waits patiently on a nearby bench, trying to regulate his breathing and steady his nerves. He mumbles under his breath, repeating a morbid mantra that Jamie, in his impetuous state of mind, fails to notice.

- I'm not going to die tonight. I'm not going to die tonight. I'm not going to have my heart ripped out of my chest and die tonight.

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Eventually the train arrives and Jamie and Ryan board it, the former praying that no transit cop will be present while the latter kind of hopes otherwise, even if it means he'll catch hell from his father for sneaking out. Already Ryan regrets not giving away their presence when the night watchman was present. The car is deserted and it quickly reaches their desired destination. Along the way they have to make two stops, and in both cases no one boards the car in which they sit.

Disembarking, Jamie grabs Ryan's hand and drags him to the alcove. The old man is waiting, looking as disheveled as ever. The look of displeasure on his face is a complete 180 degrees different than the look of excitement that plasters Jamie's. Already uncomfortable, the sight of it furthers Ryan's unease, as he is well aware the scowl the old man wears is due to his unwanted and unexpected presence.

- Who's this? What's he doing here?

- This is Ryan. He's my best friend. I figured he could play as well.

The old man, not so old as Ryan had expected based on Jamie's description of him, moves quickly, seeming to want to grab Jamie by the shoulders, not out of anger, but as a drowning man clutching for a life preserver, but stops just short of doing so.

- He needs to leave. Now. What I am about to show ya is fer yer eyes only.

- I'm sorry if I....

The old man, both eyes wide open even though Ryan had been told one seemed permanently shut, is extremely manic. He doesn't look at the interloper as he interrupts Jamie. Spittle flies from his mouth like the froth from the maw of a rabid dog.

- Send him away! Now! Our time is running out.

Jamie leads Ryan a few feet away to have some semblance of privacy. He wears a guilty expression and Ryan knows what he's going to say before he even opens his mouth. He raises his hands in protest before any of the words can come out.

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- No, no, no. No way. You're not leaving me out here all by myself. Are you crazy? There's a killer on the loose, ya know? In fact, that old fart looks pretty damn crazy. I don't think you should go with him. What if *he's* the killer!

- It'll be okay. I told you, he's my friend. I know him. It's just this one time. I'll tell him all about you and I'm sure he'll let you play next time.

- What if this isn't a game? Did you ever think of that?

- Don't be silly. What else could it be? I'll be back in a couple of minutes, I promise. Please don't leave. Please, don't be mad at me.

- I think you're making a big mistake.

- Please?

- I think you're as crazy as that guy is.

- Please? Promise?

Ryan waits a few seconds before acquiescing, more for show than anything else. As angry as he is for being left out, he is more scared of making the trek back to his place alone. That fear, along with concern for his best friend's well being, are enough to keep him hanging around a little while longer, even if he feels like a leper being shunned. Jamie claps him on the back; smiles and rushes back to the old man. He says something to him that Ryan cannot make out, something that upsets the old man, but placates him enough so that he leads Jamie to the alcove and through the hidden rusty door.

As uncomfortable as he was in the old man's presence, the absence of anyone around is even more discomfoting. Although alone, Ryan still feels as if there are a hundred pairs of eyes watching him.

- Shit.

Jamie finds himself in a cramped, loud electrical room just beyond the door that has beguiled him so much for the past week. He looks around at the many transformers and cables, knobs, dials and readouts that make the room nearly impassable. It isn't at all what he

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expected to find and he is somewhat disappointed. The old man speaks to him and his voice is lost to the humming and clanking of the machinery. He beckons Jamie forward with a wave of the hand, and twisting and turning to navigate the small confines, the two of them eventually make it to the end of the room where there is a large hole in the concrete wall. It looks like a man-sized mouse hole. Beyond this, Jamie hopes, is the strange new world that he has envisioned for so long.

Crawling through the makeshift opening, he finds all that lay on the other side is the adjoining sewer tunnel. A fetid stench rises from the knee-deep river of liquid filth that courses down the tube. What appears to be water, but has a far slimier consistency, drips from the rusty pipes overhead. A small ledge about a foot wide runs the length of the tunnel, and shuffling along the precarious edge, the old man continues to lead him further into the darkness. Free of the noise of the electrical room, Jamie is finally able to hear the words of his guide.

- It's not much further along now, son. We should be there soon enough. And not a moment too soon, I should say. How does that saying go? Yes, yes, the time is indeed nigh. He he he.

Already somewhat less than pleased with what the old man has shown him so far, Jamie is less than ecstatic when a fat, furry rat scampers over the toe of his shoe before belly flopping into the dirty murk to his left. As it doggy paddles away, he cannot help but voice his concerns. This isn't what he had expected. This isn't the fun game he thought it would be. In fact, he has more fun playing guns with Ryan, both of them running around with tree branches that somewhat resemble automatic weapons. One would be the defender of freedom while the other, dressed in red and spouting words like 'Nyet' and 'Comrade', played the part of the Russian invader. Perhaps Ryan was right, after all. This isn't a very fun game.

- What are we doing? Where are we going? Perhaps I should go back now, my friend Ryan is waiting for me.

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- Your friend Ryan should never have come. But don't worry; we're almost there. Now, let me tell ya what is about ta happen.

The impending explanation can only somewhat improve Jamie's mood. Another rat, this one riding a half-used tube of soggy toilet paper like a surfboard, floats by and again makes Jamie question his decision to be here.

- Every thousand a' years it comes. You see, it has one chance to break free of it's confines and be loosed upon the world. It's bound by it's damnation, but once a millennium it has a chance. Kinda like a cosmic parole, if ya will. For 14 days it builds it's strength by consuming the hearts of others and then, assuming the proper ritual is performed at the appropriate hour, it will be freed. Then it's evil reign over man will last for another thousand years. All will be destroyed in it's wake. We have only one chance to stop it. You have to kill it before the ritual is complete.

Jamie is only half-listening, a portion of his attention reserved on keeping an eye out for further vermin. Even if he gives the old man his complete attention, he will still not fully understand. The explanation is just too obscure. And he cares less and less about deciphering it's cryptic meaning. This is just no fun anymore. He is about to say so when something in the water catches his eye. At first he thinks it is a bundle of garbage or perhaps a tree branch clinging to the ledge on the far side of the disgusting river. But as he gets closer he sees what could only be a human hand, blue and bloated, desperately hanging onto the concrete lip.

- Oh my God. We have to get out of here.

- No! We're almost there!

- I can't do this anymore. I want to go home.

As they near the object that instills so much fear in Jamie, there ceases to be any doubt that it is a hand, the body it is attached to thankfully submerged and out of sight. Jamie feels if he saw it he'd surely go mad. Perhaps as mad as the old man, for when he points out the dead body, the bum is neither surprised nor swayed from his quest. As Jamie tries to turn around on the small concrete protuberance, the old man orders him forward, and

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growing more and more afraid of him, Jamie is incapable of doing otherwise. He starts to weep as he shuffles onward.

- This is not a time for cowardice, boy. I told ya something evil was coming. Now that evil is here and only you can stop it. There's no turning back. Be brave, it may be the only thing that will get ya through this.

Jamie barely listens to the continuing prattle. His only thoughts are of regret. Regret for coming in the first place. For allowing Ryan to be left behind. For trusting a stranger. For not living up to the mantle of hero as Conan no doubt would have done. And especially for crying like a baby when he should be rushing forth into battle if what the old man says is true and he alone is capable of saving the world.

Before any further thoughts can flash through his mind, they reach an outcropping and another rusty door. No longer interested in strange new worlds, Jamie closes his eyes as the old man opens it and ushers him through.

- We're here.

Jamie opens his eyes and finds himself in a large, open space. The walls lead up to a domed ceiling at least 30 feet high. On it is a faded fresco, the image all but obliterated over time and almost impossible to make out. A sign reading '2nd and Nash' is still visible. A small kiosk is in one corner, the word 'Tickets' written on it. An empty magazine rack is to one side while a poster barely hanging to the wall is on the other. The poster, now yellowed and frayed with age, shows a number of train routes. It takes Jamie only a moment to realize he is in an old abandoned subway station. It hasn't been in use since the city reconfigured the rail system to run on a more south/west direction, favoring connecting the downtown district with the residential part of town over the eastern harbor front. Both tunnel entrances have been blocked with wooden barriers and 'No Trespassing' signs. It has been an abandoned refuge for wildlife and the homeless ever since.

But it is not abandoned now. After the scope of the setting sinks in, Jamie hears groaning and the sounds of a struggle. His eyes are drawn to the center of the room



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and the platform that commuters used to use to board trains long ago. On it is a large stone slab, and on that, Tommy Patterson. He struggles in vein against the ropes that bind him to the dais, his pleading voice muffled by a gag in his mouth.

Jamie and the old man move down a pair of concrete steps and come closer to the incapacitated bully. The old man's voice echoes off of the high walls as they make their way.

- Hurry. It's almost time.

Eventually, the fear of doing nothing outweighs fear itself and Ryan decides to wander to keep his mind from concocting any number of gruesome scenarios his best friend may currently be in or, worse, that he may soon find himself in as well. He moves about slowly, the sounds of his footfalls, heavy breathing and thudding heart leaving him feeling more exposed, and therefore more vulnerable, than he actually is. Although he'd never admit it to Jamie, there's a part of him that hopes he'll be caught and an end will be brought to this foolishness.

He stops in front of two newspaper boxes, each containing one of the two major city publications. Both front pages, however, carry the same story, making one wonder how you choose between the two. Perhaps it has something to do with which one your parents grew up reading. Either way, the picture on both is the exact same, that of a middle-aged man of Vietnamese descent taken during happier times. The headline speaks of the same story, just using different words. The more conservative of the two publications states 'Another Body Found' while the more sensationalist rag reads 'Valentine's Day Slasher Strikes Again!'. Ryan takes a closer look at the latter and reads aloud the text that accompanies the picture.

- The body of Mr. Arnold Kim was discovered late this morning, his heart removed in the same fashion as a number of other victims discovered in recent weeks. Mr. Kim was the proprietor of Kim's Corner Store and leaves

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behind no wife or children. He is considered the ninth victim so far of the so-called Valentine's Day Slasher.

Ryan stops reading and starts thinking. He finds the name familiar, but can't quite place where he has heard it before. An idea comes to him and he quickly makes his way towards the entrance of this particular stretch of underground tracks. To suddenly have a purpose helps shove aside the fear that had been gradually gnawing at his psyche. Although, depending on the outcome of his findings, it may return with shocking force. He reaches the convenience store that he knows Jamie told him about on a variety of occasions, often speaking about how nice the owner is. This is where Jamie picks up his Conan comics, and according to the story he told him that evening, where he picked up the latest issue that Tommy ripped in half. It was on that day he met the crazy old man he ran off with tonight. Looking at the sign above the gated doors, Ryan reads the name of the store with hushed breath.

- Kim's Corner Store. Jesus.

Could this be the store whose owner they just found dead? The name is the same so it's possible. Is it likely that Jamie is, well, was, friends with the latest victim of the Valentine's Day Slasher? Ryan has a hard time believing his friend could actually be mixed up in such a huge story, but it all seems a little too coincidental. Either way, Ryan decides he has had enough. He now has a good enough reason to seek help, to hell with what his dad or even Jamie will have to say to him afterward.

Stepping away from the store, Ryan turns and makes his way to the turnstiles a few feet away from the bottom of the stairs that lead to the world above. He expects to see a guard almost immediately, perhaps stretched out on a chair, tilting it back against the wall so that the front legs hover a foot in the air above the floor. He expects he will either be reading a paperback like the new Michael Brooks novel or taking a nap, the tip of his cap stereotypically pulled down over closed eyes.

Ryan does indeed find the chair he envisioned, but it is unoccupied. Remembering the guard he and Jamie had to sneak past to get into the station near his own house, he

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decides to look for the wayward guard in the public bathrooms just to the right of the unmanned post. He checks the men's lavatory first and finds no one. He is hesitant to open the door to the women's room, his shyness coming to the forefront even under these possibly dire circumstances. It only takes a moment to conquer.

- Hello? Are there any ladies in here?

His inquiry goes unanswered, and deciding the coast is clear, he enters the room with some trepidation. The fact that no one answered him leads him to the conclusion that the room should be empty and not worth investigating further. But the lure of seeing a woman's bathroom is enough to get him to enter it nonetheless. He can't help but think if only Jamie was more interested in the mystery of what lies behind the door of the woman's bathroom instead of an old man's rusty one, all of this could have been avoided and they'd be on their way home in just a few short minutes.

Ryan looks around and is disappointed. Aside from having more stalls and no urinals, some form of dispensing machine on the wall for napkins (why women would want to eat in the bathroom is beyond Ryan's ability to comprehend) and an all around state of better cleanliness, the room is no different than that of the men's. He is about to leave when something catches the corner of his eye. In the farthest stall a pair of black shoes is visible just beneath the door. They are men's footwear, not the high heels or pumps normally worn by a woman. That, plus the fact that the person wearing them felt it necessary to not answer Ryan's earlier question, is enough for the boy to deduce something is amiss. He walks toward the stall cautiously, asking if anything is wrong. He is answered again with silence.

The best he can hope to find is a junkie, sprawled out on the toilet, needle in arm and lost in a narcotic haze. As scary as that discovery would be for a 10-year-old kid, the alternative is even worse. Trying not to think of that 'other' possibility, Ryan reaches the stall, and with a shaking hand, stretches out and pushes at the door. He

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hopes it'll be locked, but as it slowly swings inward with a slight squeak, his worst fears are confirmed.

Sitting on the toilet is the missing security guard. He stares at Ryan with lifeless eyes bulging from bruised sockets. The head is twisted on the neck at an unnatural, impossible angle. The skin is beginning to turn blue and the tongue that droops from the sagging mouth is already a dark purple.

Ryan screams, and like everything else as of late, it too goes unanswered.

Although there is no question that the person tied to the stone is Tommy Patterson, he barely resembles the bully that Jamie has come to loath and fear. Even though it has only been two weeks since he last saw him angrily throwing *Wilson* dodge balls at his crotch, Jamie has a hard time believing that the monster on that court is indeed the same boy now bound before him. Tommy has lost at least a dozen pounds; his eyes and cheeks are sunken. The sclera of his eyes is a sickly yellow instead of white. His skin has taken on the same jaundiced tone as well. His lips are cracked and blistered, his fingernails torn and bloody from trying to claw free of his confines. His clothes, never fine to begin with coming from the poor family that he does, are even more tattered and frayed than normal.

Jamie notices they are the same clothes he was wearing when he saw him that Wednesday and realizes the boy was more than likely abducted then. Jamie knows very little about Tommy's home life, having no idea that both of the boy's parents are drunks and that another seven children, some biological siblings and some foster kids kept for monthly government checks, live under a roof that can barely house half that number comfortably. But Jamie is aware that for the past two weeks no one has bothered to report Tommy missing. It's the saddest conclusion he has ever reached in his short life.

- What's going on here? What are you doing with Tommy?

- 'There's more goin' on wit Tommy here than you could possibly know, son. He's not what he appears to be.

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He's the monster I've been a tellin' ya about. He's the one behind the murders. He's the one that's a goin' to ascend and take his throne at midnight tonight. Evil will descend upon this land if ya don't stop him.

- That's crazy.

As Jamie watches, the old man pulls an ornately carven sword from a crack in the twisted tablets foundation. The blade is no more than a foot and a half long and looks somewhat diminutive in the old man's hands. When he hands it over to Jamie, however, the sword looks akin to the mighty Cimmerian's in his small grip. It weighs a ton, too, and Jamie has a hard time holding it aloft. The blade is sparkingly clean, the grip tightly wound leather and the hilt gold plated, encrusted with several jewels like diamonds and rubies. A large jade stone sits securely in its center.

- That's the Sword of Damoth. It's a sacrificial blade. It, and only it, can slay the beast before it emerges at the witching hour. And only one who is pure of heart can wield it. That someone is you, Jamie Wheeler. And the time is upon us.

- None of this makes any sense. Tommy's not a killer. He's a bully, but that's all.

- Your naivety won't protect you. Beneath the façade you see lies an evil that has been imprisoned for a thousand years. For the past 14 days it has fed on the people of this city, gaining strength from those it consumed, traits and mannerisms from those it destroyed. It has done so to endure the rite of transformation and to continue to hide amongst the people as it slowly became less of one itself. One more victim, to be taken at the right alignment of the sun, the moon and the stars, will allow the evil to escape and reign over this world. Only one who is pure of heart, full of light, can defeat this vile darkness. You, Jamie Wheeler, are that vessel. You will save the world. You have spent your whole life fantasizing about being the hero. Now is your chance to be one.

- What... what do I need to do?

- Strike. Strike now before there's no time left.

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Jamie hesitantly raises the Sword of Damoth above his head. It shakes in his hands, partly due to its weight, but mostly due to his increasing fear. Something is definitely wrong here. He knows it. He just can't put all of the pieces together fast enough. Is he doing the right thing? Will killing Tommy stop this prophesized spread of evil? Assuming the prophecy is even true, that is, and not the delusions of a deranged psyche. Is the former bully the harbinger of the end of the world or is Jamie just playing along with some maniac's game? Thinking of both Tommy and the old man helps bring things into focus. He can almost grasp what is troubling him. Looking at his would-be victim on the stone altar, things begin to clarify. Seeing Tommy Patterson's malnourished face, Jamie starts to understand the truth of the matter. And knowing the truth, knows what he has to do. The only thing he can do. The right thing to do.

Spinning away from the prostrate Tommy, shouting and pointing the tip of the blade at the old man who lead him here, Jamie taps of a reservoir of strength he never knew himself capable of possessing.

- NO! Tommy isn't the monster. You are!

As the words come, Jamie knows intuitively that they are true. The pieces of the beguiling puzzle are starting to form a picture in his mind, and although still somewhat incomplete, the truth of that statement is at least clear. Giving the old man the benefit of the doubt that he hadn't abducted Tommy over a week ago after school, leaving him here to wither away and therefore making him incapable of murdering anyone, he had said Tommy was devouring hearts to gain strength for the ritual that Jamie is supposed to stop from happening. Looking at the bully, anyone can see Tommy is anything but strong. He appears weaker than Jamie has ever seen him before and this causes Jamie to question the old man's proclamation. Conversely, over the course of the past week, it is the old man who has been getting healthier. Jamie had assumed it had to do with the help he was providing, but now believes it is from eating the hearts of his many victims. The old man also said traits were carried from one to another in

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order to help maintain the guise of humanity. Jamie noticed the similarities between the old man and Mr. Kim the day he gave Jamie the replacement copy of the destroyed issue of *The Savage Sword of Conan*. Suddenly Jamie knows how the old man was able to get the comic. It wasn't with a fruitful day of panhandling. It was with blunt force. It's why Mr. Kim's store hasn't been open since. Knowing this means knowing the fate of his friend. The knowledge enrages him, but he still has to be sure.

- What did you do to Mr. Kim?

The old man stops and regards Jamie with a quizzical expression on his face. He doesn't answer the question, but thinks about the situation for a mere moment, coming to the conclusion that the boy isn't going to do what he needs him to, not the way he had hoped he would, anyways. The old man has one card left to play, and although he had wanted to avoid doing it, it now seems necessary. It might not be enough to set him free, but it might buy him some more time. It might trick the boy in the end. Dropping into an offensive crouch, his body begins to shudder and shake and a maniacal chuckle issues forth from snarling lips.

- You want to know about your friend, Mr. Kim? He was delicious. You should have done as I said, boy. What happens now is your fault.

Jamie watches the scene unfolding before him with a mixture of emotions. He is terrified, confused and awestruck. A part of his mind wonders if it is losing its tenuous grip on reality while another part accepts the scene of horror and tries to fortify itself against what is to come next. What he sees is enough to drive anyone mad. If he hadn't prepared himself by reading the comics and watching the movies that no one thought a boy his age should read, that may very well have happened.

The old man's convulsions continue for another couple of seconds before coming to a stop. The stillness is only the calm before the storm and even the air seems charged with expectancy. Suddenly, a number of spines of varying length and thickness sprout across the old man's buckled back, upper arms and thighs. They tear through

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the many layers of fabric, shredding them. The tendrils, seemingly autonomous entities, twist and turn, pulling the loose garments off of a body that now stands at least 8 feet tall. A chiseled, muscled giant has replaced the frail old form. The skin, as hard as granite, is red in hue and as bright as any cartoon devil. The thing is completely naked and the one spot not covered with muscle is a distended belly that fails to sag enough to cover the thing's thick, barbed penis swaying between knees like a perverse pendulum. Atop the monster's head are a number of horns that encircle it's skull, curving out and upwards about a foot in length, coming back in on each other until they resemble an old fashioned manual powered lawn mower. The eyes, void of pupils, are solid yellow orbs. A forked tongue sneaks past row upon row of razor sharp teeth. When the thing speaks, it is with the hiss one would expect a snake to make if reptiles could hold a conversation.

- You cannot ssstop me, boy. Thisss isss my desstiny.

Pointing a finger at Jamie, the talon at the tip almost as long and sharp as the sword in Jamie's hands, the creature takes a few menacing steps forward, cloven footfalls echoing off the walls like thunderclaps.

- Now, you ssshall die.

As the thing moves toward him, Jamie thinks of all the times he has fantasized about being the hero, fighting off bullies and thugs with an imaginary sword. Now, as the opportunity presents itself for real, all he can do is fall to the floor and cower before the thing that was once the old man. Instead of swinging the blade triumphantly, he mewls like a kitten. Just as the end seems imminent, the thing stops advancing a foot away and screams in frustrated rage.

Jamie gets to his feet slowly, confused but thankful to be alive. Staring at the monster, the final pieces of the puzzle snap into place.

- You can't do it, can you? You can't kill me because you can't touch me!

- Sssilence!



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- You can't touch me because I'm pure. You can't defile me. That's why you wanted me to kill Tommy. You needed me to do that myself. Then you could destroy me and eat the heart that you corrupted. It had to be corrupted otherwise you'd take on pure traits. The seduction of the innocent! That's the ritual you need to perform to be set free. Let me tell ya something, asshole! It ain't gonna happen!

The thing screams again and takes a lumbering step toward him.

- I might not be able to desstroy you, but I can ssslay your friend easssily enough!

- He's not my friend. That's why you choose him for the final victim. You assumed I'd have no problems killing him. You're wrong. It's over. You loose.

- No, I don't. He will die, and a thousssand years from now I ssshall return. I am eternal.

The monster moves past Jamie, careful not to touch him, and stands before the altar. Tommy, his eyes wide with terror, sobs into the rag in his mouth. He struggles with what energy he has left, but it is to no avail. Jamie watches, and for a split second, contemplates letting the monster kill him. Years of torment and anguish suffered at Tommy's hands flash through his mind. He can't help but think how much easier his life will be if he's gone. But that's not the way a hero thinks. A hero defends the defenseless, no matter who they are. The notion that letting Tommy die would no doubt corrupt his purity, which is the monster's final trick, never enters his mind. All he thinks of is doing the right thing.

Quickly snatching the Sword of Damoth from the dirty ground, Jamie swings the blade through the air, the sharp steel connecting with and easily slicing through the monster's bloated stomach. It howls in pain and staggers backward, it's insides spilling onto the floor. Amidst the blood and gore, the intestines and bile, are a number of partially digested human hearts.

- Nooooooooooooo!

Being the source of it's newfound vigor, when the hearts pour out of the gushing wound like a morbid

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waterfall and splash onto the ground at it's feet, the monster weakens. It collapses to it's knees, the many tendrils sprouting from it's back, arms and thighs shriveling like grapes into raisins. It's eyes liquefy and pour out of the sockets, the teeth slipping loose from charred gums. It's muscles atrophy and the appendages contort in grotesque positions. The ring of horns on it's head calcify and then blow apart like piles of fallen leaves. It slumps forward, gurgles and dies.

Jamie, breathing heavily, moves forward to inspect the carcass just as a loud voice commands him to halt. Turning, he sees Ryan and a police officer standing at the top of the stairs. The cop's service revolver is drawn and pointed directly at his chest. Looking down, he sees that the crumpled body at his feet is no longer a demon, but the old man he had first encountered. The monster no longer there may not have been able to touch Jamie, but he's pretty sure the cop's bullet can.

Without a word of protest, he drops the sword in his hand. It clangs loudly off of the hard ground as he raises his hands above his head in surrender.

The following weeks and months are nothing less than chaos. The beat cop radios for backup and by the time he, Jamie and Ryan emerge from the subway station at 5<sup>th</sup> and 10, half a dozen cruisers are waiting for them, dome lights flashing, officers with guns drawn and at the ready. From the very beginning, people are wondering if this 11-year-old boy could in fact be the Valentine's Day Slasher. As absurd as the idea is, an overzealous District Attorney, trying to make a name for himself, attempts to pin the murder spree on Jamie. The trial of a minor committing such heinous acts will give him a far better chance of securing a book deal than if, as the boy claims, they were indeed committed by the dead bum the police found at the scene.

The DA's outrageous accusations are dismissed in almost no time and his career ruined. When Tommy is finally able to talk to the police, he corroborates Jamie's

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accusations by explaining how the old man abducted him after school and held him against his will in the unused subway station. He won't confirm Jamie's wild stories about the old man being a monster, however, and it is Jamie's refusal to deviate from that tale that keeps him in the public eye for so long. There are still questions to be answered in relation to the old man's violent death, but Jamie's mom makes use of her connections at the Bachman and Stark law firm where she works and soon any criminal or legal action against her son is summarily dropped.

By the time Jamie is exonerated of any wrong doing, and in fact starts being seen as the hero who saved Tommy Patterson's life and put an end to the Slasher's reign of terror, most of the media has already moved on to a bigger, juicier story. Apparently a number of kids have gone missing further up the coast and the story of an ongoing monster is much more interesting than the story of the boy who stopped one.

In a cruel twist of fate, due to the amount of time Jamie had to miss school after the incident in the subway, he is held back in the sixth grade just as Tommy said he'd make sure would happen. Tommy flunked as well, but because of poor grades, not excessive media attention.

But by the time the new school year rolls around, Jamie no longer has to fear the bully. Ever since he was rescued, Tommy has been afraid of his savior. He'd never let any of his underlings know the truth for fear it'd topple him from his leadership position, a role he relishes even more so now that he is a year older than the rest of the prey in his class. Then, when his and his family's minor celebrity comes to pass, the Patterson's, minus the foster kids in their care, move. It is a dream come true for most, but one that Jamie no longer has to share. Tommy, like most people, simply chose to ignore Jamie Wheeler, as if he has been tainted ever since by the incident belowground.

Ryan is still his friend, but the two have a hard time getting along now. Jamie is withdrawn and uninterested in the world around him. After a while he

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learns to just 'admit' that he made the whole story of the bum being a monster up if he wants people to stop looking at him like he's crazy. He has grown up much too quickly in too short a time, learning the apparently valuable lesson that if one wants to make it through life with as little conflict as possible, it's best to align oneself with the common opinion on almost all matters.

This way of thinking has sucked the life out of the once vibrant boy. Instead of spending his allowance (doubled by his parents to help alleviate their guilt for allowing their son to be placed in such a dangerous position in the first place) on Conan comics and such stuff, he saves it up to buy a top of the line baseball glove. He has yet to use it since his father continues to be too busy with work to toss the ball around on the weekends. Gone as well are the horror movies and fantasy games, cartoons and make-believe. All the things that made him happy. All the things that he reveled in in his innocence.

Almost a year after the incident, Ryan peddles his bike over to his former best friend's house. They have spent such little time together as of late he can no longer consider him his best friend without the moniker sounding like a falsehood. Jamie lets him in easily enough, but it is soon apparent that nothing much has changed in the boy's attitude since they last met a little over a month ago. Ryan tries his best to break his friend free of the self-imposed shell, even going so far as to ask him about that night they snuck out and what really happened in the subway tunnels. Jamie claims nothing strange or impossible happened. He had lied at the time for attention, but knows better now. He has refused to tell the truth for so long now even he has doubts of its veracity when it crosses his mind, usually in the form of feverish nightmares.

Ryan sighs, knowing his friend may be truly and irrevocably lost. He has one last card to play that he hopes will rescue Jamie from the ordinary doldrums he now constantly wallows in.

- Hey, I read in *Starlog* magazine that there's gonna be a new Schwarzenegger film coming out soon. It sounds

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really cool. It's gonna be him fighting a monster from outer space.

- Yeah? Sounds neat.

It is the most excitement Jamie seems able to muster and half of it is forced and false. Ryan excuses himself a few minutes later, claiming he has errands to run for his dad when in actuality he just wants to leave. The friend he once knew is gone and the scene too sad for him to continue bearing.

Alone in his room, Jamie sits and thinks about Ryan and his questions and that night long ago. Stripping away the layers of the imagined story he now claims as reality, he recalls what really happened. He recalls the words the old man had spoken to him. And although he thought he had it all figured out back then, he realizes that he is just now finally coming to understand things. Although he never allowed the monster to steal his innocence and purity that night, he might as well have since he's freely handed it over to the ghost of it since then. The fate of mankind may no longer be in the balance, but the fate of Jamie Wheeler certainly still is.

Jumping up from his bed, he races downstairs and out the front door just in time to see Ryan starting to ride away.

- Wait! Wait!

Ryan stops the bike, turns it around and meets Jamie at the end of his driveway. For the first time in a long time, Jamie is smiling. It may be a weak smile now, but it is hopefully the sign of more genuine ones to come.

- You wanna hear what really happened that night?

- You bet I do!

- Okay. But first you're going to have to tell me all about that new Arnold movie.

## **THE END**

## **Tale #5**

### **Routines**

Travis's life was built on routine. In fact, his life consisted of nothing but routine. And as most routines tend to go, his had long overstayed its welcome. Every morning he would wake up, have a coffee in lieu of a real breakfast, barely catch the bus on time and grudgingly stumble into work. Once there, he would boot up his computer, and while the necessary programs loaded, make another coffee in the small kitchenette. Cup in hand, he would sit back down in his cubicle, pop the headphones of his ipod into his ears and begin the monotonous task that his data entry job entailed. Eight hours later, after having spent the whole day doing the same thing ad nauseam, he would power down his workstation, catch the bus and go home.

Day in and day out it was always the same thing. On the weekends he spent half of his time dreading the upcoming Monday and the other half telling himself the time had come for a change. But he never did anything about it. He never took the initiative. His job paid well enough that the rent and bills were covered and his stomach always adequately fed. His job was boring as hell, but not too stressful. His coworkers were acquaintances, neither friends nor enemies. There weren't enough positives in his life to make it enjoyable; not enough negatives to be unbearable. There was no reason to turn left when he always, always turned right. Travis was coasting along, feeling nothing.

Except for when it came to the blond on the bus.

He first noticed her a month ago when, on a rare occasion where he failed to follow routine, he didn't catch his bus on time. Ever since, this new schedule had become routine, even though it consistently made him 15 minutes late for work. His job sucked and there was a high turnover rate so his boss didn't care as long as the 15 minutes came out of his lunch hour. The blond was tall and had amazing legs. She liked to display them with short

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dress skirts. She had long, lustrous blond hair that perfectly framed her angelic face. Her nose was thin, but not birdlike. Her lips glistened alluringly. Her skin was smooth, almost porcelain. And her eyes were a piercing shade of blue. Travis was smitten from the first time he saw her. His pulse quickened and a thin film of sweat broke out across his brow and on his palms. He had almost forgotten how to breathe. He had begun to fidget in his seat, his erratic movements catching her attention. She looked in his direction and he quickly averted his gaze. He stared past the window on his left at the familiar scenery rolling past.

From that day forward, he continued to steal furtive glances of her. He began to discern her routine (dress skirts on Monday, casual blouses on Friday, a penchant for blue that complimented her eyes midweek) and built a fantasy life around her. He didn't have the courage to approach her in real life, but in his mind they had numerous conversations and found they had similar interests and goals. They began to date, eventually moving in together before getting married and having 2.5 children.

But everyday, without fail, Travis would get off at his scheduled stop and she would continue on to her own destination. Every time Travis would berate himself for not having had the nerve to approach her.

And this became Travis's new routine. Until today. Today, as Travis appraised her from the corner of his eye, she turned in her seat and returned his stare. He quickly broke eye contact, his heart pounding in his chest and the sweat pouring more profusely than ever. A split-second later, when he dared look back, he found her still staring. And smiling. Travis was able to hold her gaze only slightly longer than before, and then turned to stare out the window again a second later.

This routine continued as if it were a well-rehearsed play, each successive time Travis was able to look at her just a little bit longer. Eventually he felt confident enough to smile back. The smile quickly faded as he realized he was only moments away from his regular stop. He would go to work and the blond would continue

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on and he would spend the rest of the day wondering what could have been if he had just stayed on the bus.

So he did.

Breaking the well-worn routine had an almost intoxicating effect on him. Coupled with the blond's continued smile, he felt lighthearted almost to the point of passing out. Once they had cleared his stop, she stood and approached him, moving gracefully even as the bus bumped and rattled down the poorly paved street. Travis stood to meet her on legs he feared would buckle at any second.

"You missed your stop." She said.

Travis had always envisioned her having a sweet voice that would match her soft features. Instead, she had a very husky one that immediately reminded him of a young Kathleen Turner. He found it sexy as hell.

His voice, on the other hand, came out sounding as squeaky as Mickey Mouse's.

"Um, yeah, that's okay." Travis stammered. He was shell-shocked to discover she was as aware of his travel routines as he was of hers.

"Well, I don't want to miss mine." She said.

To pull the cord, she had to lean past Travis and her breasts brushed against his arm, sending electricity down his spine and around to his groin.

"Well, here we are." She said seductively.

As the bus pulled alongside the curb, Travis remained immobile. He only moved to get off of the bus when the blond inquired, in that breathy voice of hers, if he was coming or not.

He followed her into an alley a couple blocks away from the bus stop, feeling as giddy as a youngster skipping school. He was excited. Being with the blond was only one of the reasons. He was energized for the first time in years. This was different. This wasn't routine. This held the promise of things new and exciting. And as scared as he was, he could hardly recall the last time he felt so alive.

The alley was filthy, but it was secluded and deserted and would suit their purpose well. The blond leaned against the dirty wall and slipped out of her jacket.



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She began unbuttoning her blouse as Travis stood before her, nervously licking his lips.

*Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God*, he thought. They were actually going to do it, right then and there! He began to fumble with the belt buckle on his jeans, and after a number of failed attempts, looked down at his trembling hands to oversee the job. As he slid off his pants, the blond removed her blouse and bra.

*Oh my God*, Travis thought as he looked at her.

At first it appeared as if the blond had a dozen nipples instead of the normal two. Upon closer inspection, he realized what he had mistakenly assumed were nipples were actually holes scattered across her smooth skin. As he watched with baffled curiosity, the holes began to pucker like a baby's mouth anticipating the bottle.

"Oh my God." Travis said, horrified.

Before he could close his mouth after forming the last word, green, slimy tendrils sprung forth from the holes on the blond's chest. One of them quickly snaked past Travis's lips and teeth, driving down his throat. Two others pushed their way into his nostrils. A few no larger than strands of hair that branched off from them slid into the corners of his eyes and pushed their way beyond the watering orbs. Two new tendrils grew out of the largest still in his mouth and curved outwards, reaching around to puncture his ears.

While the proboscis in his throat kept Travis from screaming for help, more tendrils shot out and curled around his wrists, thighs, waist and neck to control his struggles and keep him from making any kind of escape. But Travis didn't struggle much. It didn't take long for the thin tendrils behind his eyes to make their way to his brain.

Up until today Shelly's life had been nothing but routine. But today, things changed. The man with whom she regularly shared the bus, whom she always stared at admiringly and who in turn always stared at the leggy blond, had finally turned and looked in *her* direction.

And smiled.

# The Deal With Pets

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*For William M. Gaines and Al Feldstein*

Harold was on his hands and knees in the basement of the large house he inherited from his parents, scooping clumps of cat feces from the litter box and depositing it into a plastic grocery bag. He held his breath to avoid as best he could inhaling the fetid stench of droppings and ammonia that filled the corner where Louise's cat went to the bathroom. It was a calico named Sparkles and Harold wondered, not for the first time, how such a small creature could piss and shit so much in a week.

It was Sunday morning, and as Louise laid in bed three floors above getting her 'beauty sleep', Harold was reluctantly finishing the final task on the weekly list of house chores. As he knelt before the blue plastic box that was Sparkles toilet, he wondered, and not for the first time, just how he came about being in this position. The cat wasn't even his pet, yet he was solely responsible for cleaning up after the beast. Thoughts of why that was so, along with how it came to be, had become as much a part of his Sunday morning routine as cleaning up after Sparkles and musing on the animal's excretion prowess.

Harold never had any intention of ever owning a pet, even when his parent's small Cessna crashed after take-off and their deaths left him the very spacious house to occupy alone. He enjoyed the peace and quiet and didn't feel the need to fill the void in companionship their passing brought about. He missed them, of course, but wasn't so lonely by their sudden absence that he felt the need to go out and buy a purring cat or a braying, barking dog. He had no desire for the persistent, annoying chirps and squawks of a budgie bird or want for any of the more exotic species like a ferret or a snake. The spiders he sometimes saw scurrying down the walls, around the drain of the tub or crawling across the ceiling were the only things he ever shared his home with.

By the time Louise and Sparkles entered his life, it could be said he came to view the spiders as his version of pets. Louise, however, saw them as a disgusting infestation.

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It was only one of the many things they clashed over - his desire to spare the spiders' lives and her insistence that he kill them on sight. Like the cleaning of the litter box, the role of exterminator fell on Harold's shoulders alone. During late spring, summer and early fall, he could placate Louise by throwing the spiders outside, where he hoped they would eventually find new homes in the hedges surrounding the property. But God help him if he lost one before he could toss it out. Louise demanded that he see the eight-legged intruder run away after he deposited it. Harold quickly learned to lie if he hadn't. It was much easier than spending the next hour searching for an AWOL arachnid.

Like all the things that flitted through Harold's mind as he cleaned out the litter box, he often wondered just how he came about sharing his home and bed with a woman of such disparate temperament. The answer to that one was easy. It all came down to sex.

Even though his parents' estate left him somewhat well off, it didn't leave him financially secure for the rest of his life, so he kept his job as a lowly clerk at Bachman and Stark law, squirreling away a large portion of his bi-weekly paycheck into a savings account he hoped would soon be large enough to one day retire on. It had always been his plan to retire much earlier than 65, but the recent financial crisis hit his investments pretty hard and he now wondered if he'd be able to quit the firm before he turned 90.

Harold was 42-years old when he met Louise, and to no one's surprise, a virgin. He hadn't even kissed a girl since he was 13 and forced to play spin-the-bottle at his friend Lee's place. Girls just flat-out scared Harold and he didn't recall ever going back when he knew there'd be some there. As he grew older, his fear of girls became his fear of women. He was extremely shy and awkward around them. He started to shake and sweat profusely whenever he needed to deal with members of the opposite sex. In one case, he even broke out in hives and had to leave work early for the day. He kept his interactions with the women at his office to no more than a 'Hi, how ya doin?', which seemed to work fine for all parties involved.

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The only thing that terrified Harold as much as women was using the bathroom in public. There was no way he could avoid going in an eight-hour shift and he quickly learned it was much easier to use the restroom on the floor below his. It tended to be deserted more often than not. The three stalls and two urinals in the restroom on his floor were always somewhat occupied and made his going almost impossible. He often wondered what his co-workers ate to make them need to go to the bathroom much more regularly than the people below.

It was on a Friday afternoon while making one of these pilgrimages that Harold inadvertently set the wheels of his meeting Louise into motion. He had been exiting the restroom when he ran into a man who worked on that floor. Harold would just nod to anyone he ever encountered and usually that would suffice, but on that day, Rich Bond ("My name's worth a fortune", he'd often joke) felt the need to start a conversation.

"Hey," He said in response to Harold's silent tilt of the head. "I've seen you around a couple of times. What department do you work for?"

Harold couldn't bring himself to explain that he was incapable of taking a dump or a piss when someone else was in the stall or urinal next to him, which was more often than not the case with the bathroom one floor above, so that was why he was there now. It was just too embarrassing. He needed to come up with a reason for being on the wrong floor and said the first thing that popped into his head.

"I work over in Jones' division." He said quickly, hoping the conviction in his voice would carry the lie.

"In HR?" Rich said. "Awesome."

Harold couldn't believe he got away with it. In a second, though, he would wish he hadn't.

"Listen, a group of us are going over to O'Malley's after work for Roy's birthday. Roy works in accounting; you've probably seen him around. You should come."

"Yeah, sure, that sounds great." Harold stammered. Not getting caught on his first lie had thrown

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him off guard and he couldn't think of anything else except to accept the invitation.

He had no intention of going, but at the end of the day, when he stepped out of the elevator and into the lobby, he found Rich and a group of the man's coworkers waiting for him.

"Hey, hey, the gang's all here." Rich said, smiling the smile Friday usually elicits in most people. "Everybody, this is Harold."

"Hi." Harold said, no trace of a smile found anywhere on his face.

"Awesome." Rich said after quick introductions had been made. "Let's get going then."

Out of time and out of excuses, there was nothing left for Harold to do but tag along.

O'Malley's Pub was packed, but Rich had called ahead and reserved a table for 12 in the rear section of the room, away from the more raucous crowds congregating near the bar and kitchen. Harold sat with them, feeling uncomfortable. He didn't even bother to remove his coat. Shirley, their waitress, took the drink orders. Harold asked for a Pepsi, claiming he had errands to run later and couldn't drink any alcohol. He only had one glass of wine in his life, during a party for his parents' 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and hated it. He also lied because the fictitious errands gave him an early exit strategy. He planned on excusing himself to run them in 20 minutes, tops. If he managed to keep his nose out of the conversation long enough, he might be able to get out of there unscathed, his ruse undetected.

Shirley returned with the drinks - a few pitchers of beer, a couple rum and Cokes and Harold's fizzing soda. Having not patronized an eatery in longer than he could remember, Harold pulled out his wallet, preparing to pay Shirley right away instead of waiting for the bill.

"How much do I owe you?" He asked her timidly.

Shirley's eyes went wide at the sight of Harold's bulging leather wallet. It was stuffed with 10's and 20's and was at least an inch thick. She made a mental note to latch

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onto this guy if things with the lawyer at another table didn't pan out.

"It'll be a buck fifty, honey, but you can own up at the end of the night."

"Oh, okay." Harold said, returning the wallet to his back pocket.

But not before it and its valuable contents was noticed by Louise Steppinhall, sitting alone two booths over. If she were a cartoon character, her eyes would have been replaced with dollar signs and she'd have begun panting like one of Pavlov's dogs, her bright red tongue hanging from a salivating mouth at the sight of it. Rearranging her boobs for maximum cleavage, she quickly got up from her table, taking the half-finished scotch on the rocks she had slowly been nursing for the past hour and made her way to Harold's. She had to move swiftly to ensure that tramp Shirley didn't steal another one away from her. At 35-years old, she could no longer compete with that kind of tight ass.

She asked the couple at the table in between if she could use one of their extra chairs. She planted it right next to Harold who had planted his at the end of the table in order to make a quick getaway.

"Hey, sweetheart." She said, trying her best to emote in a husky, sexy voice. "I'm Louise. Who are you?"

"Umm, ahh, I'm Harold." Harold barely managed to say. He felt like he was going into anaphylactic shock and his tongue had swollen to three times its normal size.

"You're wrong there, Buck-O."

"I... I am?"

"Damn straight." Louise said coyly. "You're the guy who's going to buy me a drink."

"I... I am?"

"Whattsa matter with you?" She said, laughing. "You a broken record or something?"

Harold's initial wish to go unnoticed by the group was now backfiring. When he looked to them, even to Rich with the million dollar name or whatever the hell he had said a dozen times already, to save him, he discovered

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they were all too busy interacting with each other. No one had even noticed Louise join the table.

“Okay, let’s start over. I’m Louise. And you are?”

“Harold.”

“Harold...?” She said, trailing off expectantly.

“Harold... the guy who’s going to buy you a drink?”

“Exactly.” She said, smiling seductively. *Damn*, she thought. *I can still turn it on when it counts.*

They made small talk for the next 40 minutes. Or, more accurately, Harold listened to her talk non-stop, nodding and sweating being his only contributions to the one-sided conversation. He paid for the three drinks she downed during that time, asking Shirley for the bill an hour after he had arrived. He didn’t notice the sinister stare Shirley shot Louise when she returned with it. Helping Louise into her fake fur coat, Harold wished the people gathered at the table a great night and Roy a happy birthday. They were all left wondering where the hooker had suddenly come from as Harold left O’Malley’s with Louise on his arm.

*If only she had been a hooker*, Harold thought for the hundredth time as he swept up the loose litter with the straw broom he kept in the other corner of the basement. His life would have been a lot easier. They had gone for a drive after leaving the pub and it was nearly 10 o’clock when he pulled up to her apartment building downtown. He would later find out that she had been evicted that afternoon for three months of past due rent, a bill he would eventually have to pay, but on that night he was as yet unaware of her sinister machinations.

Sitting in the parking lot, the engine idling, Harold felt all of the nervous energy he had slowly been able to let go of throughout the course of the evening come flooding back. With much trepidation, Harold closed his eyes as Louise leaned forward in what he thought was preparation for a goodnight kiss. To his shock, she unbuttoned his pants instead. Louise moved fast and he was in her mouth before he could utter a word of protest.



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“Wha... What are you doing?” He managed to say between squeaks and gasps.

“Relax.” Louise said, going back to work. If she had been a hooker, it would have been the easiest money she’d ever made. Harold came in less than a minute.

“Wow.” Louise said, surprised. She instantly hoped that Harold misunderstand her reaction to his speedy ejaculation. “I mean... that was fantastic.”

“Thanks.” Harold said, huffing and puffing, his entire body flushed. In the moment of orgasm he had apparently forgotten all about his fear of women.

“How about we take things back to your place and see what else you’re capable of?”

Harold, excited by the prospect, frantically put the car in gear without even bothering to button up his pants. They made it to his place in less than 20 minutes, and two years later, Louise still hadn’t left.

The next day, Harold found himself going to pay her late rent and retrieving her meagre belongings. It amounted to little more than clothes, a few CD’s and some books, mostly of the trashy romance novel variety. The last thing he loaded in his car, the ‘special surprise’ Louise had told him he’d find in the bathroom, was Sparkles. The cat scratched him at least a half dozen times before he was able to force it into the small carrying case he found left behind in the dirty tub.

Harold was less than happy with the prospect of having a roommate already, and his displeasure increased with the addition of the roommate’s pet. But he couldn’t bring himself to ask Louise to leave. Or to tell her to. Some might have thought it was because he was too nice or maybe too timid to kick her out when she had no place to go, but in actuality it was fear that stayed his tongue. It was his fear of confrontation. It was a fear of her possible *Fatal Attraction*-ish retribution (although he welcomed the idea of finding Sparkles in a pot of boiling water). It was the fear of, having now lost his virginity, returning to a sex life that consisted of skin mags and Internet porn only.

He tolerated her constant nagging, negative attitude and the added stress of the major intrusion on his

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solitary lifestyle because he enjoyed having sex with her. Harold assumed he would have enjoyed having sex with anyone, but with Louise it seemed extra special. She was an animal in the sack. Since it had taken 42 years for the opportunity to present itself, he could be dead before he ever got another opportunity. Maybe the novelty would eventually wear off, but the scarcity with which they actually copulated ensured that would not be for many years to come. She was a pro when it came to leaving him wanting more.

So the two of them fell into a routine, with Harold doing most of the work and Louise reaping most of the rewards. He worked his 9 to 5 job and she slept in. He shopped for the groceries and cooked all of their meals while she watched the TV he had never wanted, but bought for her anyway. When he stayed home she often went out, spending her time with 'girlfriends'. These nights included a number of sleepovers that she often returned home from reeking of booze, stale cigarettes and cheap cologne. She claimed to have many girlfriends yet most of the people on her Facebook page were guys. When the phone rang it would invariably be a male's voice asking for her.

Harold knew she was stepping out, but he didn't care. Immediately after making love, it was easy to hope that one day she'd just step out and not bother to come back at all. That a couple of days later, some new beau, as misled as he had been, would come calling for her stuff. Like a junkie, it was easiest to want to kick the habit just after pulling the needle from the arm. As time went by, however, the need for that next fix grew to a point where he was willing to put up with damn near anything to get it.

It had been two days since they had had sex, and standing with broom in hand and a clean litter box in front of him, it was all too easy to dismiss the importance of Louise in his life and to go ahead with the plan. If it had been a couple of weeks since they last screwed, he might have ignored his promise and put it off just a little bit longer. He saw a small spider run across the cold concrete floor, having been inadvertently swept up with the litter,

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and smiled, happy that it had escaped. The memory the sight of it sparked strengthened his resolve.

Louise had acquiesced and allowed Harold to throw spiders outside for most of the year, but in the winter she expected more decisive action. She had discovered a spider crawling across the kitchen counter one night while looking for a snack and her barked order that Harold get in there that instant was obeyed without question.

“Hurry up, Harold! Get in here before it gets away!” She said, her voice shrill. Long gone were the days when it sounded husky. Except for when she was on the phone with one of her men, of course.

“Okay, okay, okay.” Harold said, quickly scooping the spider up in the palm of his hand. “C’mon, little guy.”

“For the love of God.” Louise said, exasperated. She placed her hands on her hips, watching Harold leave the room. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“What?” Harold said, stopping two feet from the door leading to the basement. “I’m getting rid of the spider like you asked me to.”

“You have to go to the basement to kill it?”

“I’m not going to kill it.” Harold said, honestly confused.

“Whattaya mean you’re not gonna kill it? What’d I call you in here for otherwise?”

“You don’t normally make me kill them. You let me put them outside.”

“Well, throw the damn thing outside, then!”

“I can’t. It’s winter. It’ll freeze to death in a second.”

“Does it look like I give a shit? I don’t want those things in my house. They crawl all over your face when you’re asleep!”

Harold was willing to bet the rest of the life savings Louise hadn’t yet managed to squander that no spider had ever crawled across her face while she slept. She went to bed wearing an inch of green goop that was supposed to have age-defying properties covering it (Harold had yet to see it make a difference) and if one ever

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tried it would have gotten stuck and discovered first thing in the morning.

“But they’re in the basement.” Harold said, opting to not bring into the conversation her nightly cosmetic indulgences. He was only too well aware of how concerned she was about her failing looks.

“They?” Louise said, her anger rising. “What do you mean ‘they?’” You mean to tell me you’ve put spiders down there before? More than one?”

Harold gulped, the click in his throat audible. He wisely chose not to answer.

“Well, no longer, do you hear me? The spiders are either outside or dead, got it? I don’t give a fuck if that’s one and the same thing in the winter. I don’t want them in the basement anymore. Do you know how big they can get down there? Huge. It ends tonight. Now. With the one in your hand.”

Upset, but too afraid to contradict her, Harold slowly opened his hand, revealing nothing. At some point during their altercation, the spider had managed to escape.

“Son of a bitch!” Louise shouted. “Good going, numbskull. Look what you went and did. God dammit!”

She spent the next hour hovering around Harold as he searched in vain for the elusive spider. Although he never let it show on his face for fear of bringing down her wrath, he was overjoyed that the little bug had gotten away. From that night onward, whenever he came across a wayward spider, he picked it up and deposited it in the basement as stealthily as he could. For every one he managed to save, however, there were always at least another two or three he’d have to kill. Victims Louise had managed to trap under overturned cups and mugs while he was at work. She justifiably failed to trust he would dispose of them to her murderous satisfaction and always kept watch as he crushed them with Kleenex and flushed the remains down the toilet. He felt horrible every time he had to do it. After all, it wasn’t their fault Louise was around. It was his. It wasn’t their fault that she feared their escape from the confines of the cellar in the middle of the night. That was hers.

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And it wasn't until a month later that Harold discovered just how huge those reprieved spiders could actually get.

He had been cleaning Sparkles' litter box as he did every Sunday, saving that chore for when the sweeping, running of the dishwasher and wiping down of the sinks, toilets and tubs in the bathrooms were done. As he unscrewed the cap of the 5kg container of litter, a gruff voice spoke to him from behind.

"I thought we had a deal, Harold."

Harold jumped. It wasn't Louise disguising her voice. There was someone else in the basement with him. As he turned to locate the source of the voice, he dropped the jug in his hand and the contents spilled onto the floor he had just swept.

Sitting atop the washing machine was the largest spider he had ever seen. In fact, it was the largest spider anyone on the planet earth had ever seen outside of a horror movie. It was perched precariously, the surface area of the washing machine barely able to contain its massive size. Its eight, two-inch thick legs rose up and out of its body, but had to bend back inwards to find footholds along the curved white edges of the machine. Its fat, hairy posterior rested against the raised back section that housed the controls for the size of the load, desired temperature and assorted spin cycles. It was canted at a downward angle and its head, about the size of a volleyball, hung over the lip. Goo dripping from large mandibles was forming a sticky puddle on the floor. It shifted its weight to the right, its legs struggling to find purchase and keep from toppling over. It now faced Harold directly and stared at him with eight eyes the size of quarters. When it spoke again there was no sign of the mouth hidden beneath its big fangs.

"Why have you been killing my children, Harold?"

It said in a voice carrying both hints of menace and disappointment. "I thought we had a deal."

"Oh my God." Harold barely managed to whisper, too shocked to be truly and appropriately terrified.

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“Be still, hue-man.” The thing continued. “I do not wish you harm. I seek only an explanation and a promise that things will return to the way they used to be.”

“YOU need an explanation!” Harold said, insanity creeping into the sound of his voice. It was the closest he had ever come to cracking a joke in his life; a life he now feared was about to come to a quick end. “What ARE you?”

“What do I look like, Harold? I’m a spider. You put me down here in the days before you started killing my kind. Why have you suddenly chosen to become my enemy?”

“It’s not my fault!” Harold said defensively. “It’s Louise’s!”

“The woman you share this house with?”

“Yes, her!” Harold said enthusiastically, clinging to the idea that if he could shift blame to her his life would be spared. “She demands that I kill every spider she finds. She watches me and makes sure I do it. She thinks you’re disgusting and an infestation.”

The giant spider shook its giant head, and unless he was mistaken, Harold was almost positive he heard it chuckling to itself.

“From an evolutionary standpoint, you’d be amazed how it is the hue-mans that are the ‘disgusting infestation’. The question now is what are you going to do about it?”

“I’ll stop, I swear.” Harold said, begging forgiveness. “From now on I’ll never kill another spider. My home will be your sanctuary, I promise.”

“Not good enough.” The spider hissed. “Louise is crafty. They may have gotten to her already. And besides, I want vengeance for my dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We had a deal, Harold. It may have been an unspoken one, but we had it nonetheless. You allowed us to live in peace and we, in return, took care of other, less than desirable – what did Louise refer to us as? – oh yes, infestations. Ants, earwigs, cockroaches, flies and other... things... that live in these walls. Things your fragile psyche

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is better never learning the existence of. Foot soldiers from another place that we are trying to protect you from. But that's changed. Our numbers are depleted and the balance of power in this war has shifted in their favor. Things must return to the way they were."

"I told you, I'll never kill another spider." Harold said, his hand to his heart as if he were reciting the pledge of allegiance.

"And I told you I demand vengeance."

"What would you have me do?" Harold finally asked after a prolonged moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Perhaps a new deal can be struck."

As Harold watched the small spider he had almost inadvertently swept up scurry beneath the washing machine the giant one had sat upon a month ago, he recalled the decision that had been reached. Over the past few weeks a plan had been concocted and tonight would see it to fruition.

Louise had another one of her infamous 'nights out' with her 'girlfriends' and after she left Harold grabbed the large bag of Lotus cat food from its spot atop the refrigerator in the kitchen. Instead of filling the small dish reserved for Sparkles' dinner kept next to the pantry, he began dropping the kibble on the floor in a straight line, creating a trail from the kitchen to the hallway to the basement.

The cat, who had been waiting next to the dish, meowing incessantly, quickly followed him, eating the dried food as she went, not the least bit fazed by the sudden change in protocol.

Harold smiled sinisterly. The plan was set in motion. He had nothing to do now, but wait.

Louise came home earlier than she had hoped, the young man she picked up at the bar turning out to be a dud. He had flashed some big bills and they had left in a fancy red sports car, but it turned out he had that kind of disposable income and car because he had no other major life expenditures or responsibilities. After a few hours of clubbing, he told her she'd need to be really quiet so as not to wake his parents when they snuck in through the

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backdoor of the house *they* owned and where *he* lived in the basement.

*What the hell is wrong with guys these days?* She wondered from the backseat of the cab taking her home. The cab she'd pay for with Harold's credit card. *When did they all stop growing up?* She could just imagine the 'man's' basement 'apartment' – movie posters on the walls, boxes upon boxes of comic books on the floor and shelves full of action figures and toy model kits. Arrested development had become an epidemic of staggering proportions lately and Louise wondered if she'd be able to land a 'real man' before it was too late. She just couldn't see herself giving up the goods on a futon beneath *Batman* posters and the watchful eye of a Mr. Spock doll. But, as much as she hated to think about it, her 'goods' had an expiry date that was drawing much too near. How was she ever going to find an adequate sugar-daddy when all the men she met seemed to still need their real ones?

*Well*, she thought as she walked through the door of the house, *at least I still have Harold*. He might not be the greatest catch there ever was, but at least he didn't spend all of his paycheck, or allowance for crying out loud, at the local comic book shop.

She kicked off her high heels and hung up the fur coat that was beginning to show its age just as much as she was. All of the lights were off and she assumed Harold had gone to bed. Her movements sounded extra loud in the eerie silence that seemed to pervade the darkened house. After a second she realized it wasn't completely dark or absolutely silent after all. A faint glow could be seen emanating from the basement and a sound was competing with the constant, monotonous ticking of the grandfather clock in the sitting room.

Straining her ears, she discovered the unpleasant noise was coming from Sparkles. Her cat was meowing and she could tell right away that it wasn't out of hunger, playfulness or any sense of curiosity. The constant mewling was caused by distress.

"Sparkles?" Louise said, wondering what the hell Harold was doing that he'd allow her cat to continue



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whining like that unchecked. *He'd better be unconscious somewhere*, she thought. Maybe he hit his head falling from a stepladder or something. It'd be the only excuse she'd accept for showing such a callous disregard towards her precious pet.

Louise walked to the end of the hall and descended the rickety stairs into the cellar, all the while Sparkles' feline cries growing louder in her ears. As it rose decibel by decibel, she decided that Harold would need more than just a stern talking to this time. He would need to be appropriately punished. If he weren't willing to take care of her beloved, than she wouldn't be willing to take care of his. She decided it'd be a long time before she went down on him again. The realization came that it had already been months since she had. No wonder he was treating her with such disrespect. Perhaps the opposite course of action was needed here. Maybe it was time she warmed back up to Harold. It was the only sure-fire way she knew to get him back on track. It was so easy keeping a man in line, but such a bothersome chore. She'd still have to have a chat with him about his responsibilities, especially where her cat was concerned, but other than that perhaps it'd be best to go a bit easy on him. Like her mother taught her - you catch more bees with honey.

She entered the unfinished room in the basement where the cat box was kept along with the washer and dryer. Harold had run a load that morning, and in his miserly way, had hung all of the clothes and bed sheets up to dry instead of putting them in the dryer. Oh well, it just meant more saved money for her to spend in the long run. Sparkles' crying was much louder now and she followed the sound through the gauntlet of hanging jeans, sweaters and undergarments. When she came to the last row, she pushed aside a white sheet and was horrified by what she discovered beyond it.

"Sweet Jesus." She said, her hand rising to her mouth to chase a sharp intake of breath.

Before her, a large, thick web ran the entire length of the wall. It was attached to overhead support beams and assorted clutter littering the floor. Directly in its center,

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Sparkles struggled against the sticky confines; her thrashing and mewling increased with the arrival of her loving owner. The fervor could be an instinctual reaction or, if one wanted to ascribe a higher level of intelligence to a cat that may or may not be warranted, a warning.

Louise took a step forward, less concerned with the impossibility of the scene than trying to figure out a way to extricate her precious pet from the intricate trappings of the silken web. A voice from behind halted her progress.

“Hello, Louise. You’re home early.”

Louise turned to find Harold standing in front of - or was he blocking? - the entryway to the room. She only had a moment to register the coldness in his voice before she was thrown off track by the fact that he was wearing a bright yellow rain slicker, galoshes and gloves. Just as she was about to comment on the absurd wardrobe, she noticed for the first time that the entire floor was covered with a clear sheet of industrial strength plastic.

*What the hell is going on around here?* She wondered. Just then, Sparkles meowed and Louise remembered the importance of the task at hand. She could deal with Harold and this apparent newfound fetish of his later. For now, there was a more pressing problem to be taken care of.

“Harold, you have to help me.” She said, returning her attention to the confined cat. “We have to get Sparkles unstuck.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you.” Harold said coldly. A small smirk appeared at the corner of his mouth. “It’s not a part of the plan.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Louise said, finally managing to get her fingers wrapped around Sparkles’ gyrating, furry torso. “Lend me a fuckin’ hand, willya?”

“I’m sorry.” Harold said. Just below the menace in his voice was a faint trace of sincere disappointment. “I made a deal. It has to be this way. I’m sorry.”

“What are you...?” Louise began, her agitated voice trailing off to a whisper when she spied the monster at Harold’s feet. “My God.”

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Her mind simply couldn't process the optical data it was receiving. The thing was obviously a spider yet it somehow stood to the height of Harold's thigh. It skittered across the plastic covered floor with amazing speed and was on top of her before half a dozen thoughts could flash through her mind in split-second intervals.

*The plastic on the floor is to help contain the mess.*

*The mess will be my insides.*

*This creature is going to kill me.*

*Harold is going to do nothing to stop it.*

*This can't be happening.*

*My God, it is!*

The spider leapt at her from a foot away, all of it's weight landing against her chest, knocking her back into the web. It placed it's foremost legs against her shoulders, pinning her further into the sticky trap, and raised itself by placing it's four back legs on her hips. They were now face to face. Spreading it's large mandibles, it revealed a mouth full of razor sharp, pointy teeth. Thick mucus dripped from the puckering orifice. Louise screamed as the creature leaned forward in mocking parody of planting a goodnight kiss on her lips.

"Harold, help me!" Louise screamed.

But Harold didn't move. His immobility was borne more from confusion than the strong sense of malice that had previously seemed to resonate off of him. Truth be told, the menace he had exuded was mostly an act. He put it on in part to frighten Louise, but also to convince himself that he was cold-blooded enough to allow what was about to happen to happen. He tried to assuage the small part of his mind he couldn't convince by telling himself that the spider wouldn't go through with it anyway. On top of that, there was another part of him that didn't even trust his senses, figuring the whole thing was imagined and that Louise had somehow finally driven him insane.

Thinking of Louise made Harold look at her and he was surprised to feel pity and remorse as the giant spider leaned in closer for the kill. Assuming that what he was seeing was in fact reality, and by the look of it as fatal

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an endeavor as the spider had promised it would be, Harold had nothing left save the weak lie that he was mean-spirited enough to see this thing through. He was a good liar, but not that good.

And as much as his sudden reversal of feelings came from a place of guilt, morality and conscience, the predominant factor behind the sudden shift came from the selfish realization that he hadn't gotten laid in over a month. As he stood there, feeling idiotic in his yellow slicker, boots and gloves, the fact that he might never have sex again hit him like a chastised freight train. As he watched Louise struggle against the monster pinning her to the web, he couldn't help but think he'd never see her naked and thrashing about the same way beneath him again.

"Harold, save me!" She screamed.

*Harold, fuck me,* he heard in his mind.

"Hurry!"

*Faster.*

"Oh, my God, please!"

*Harder. Deeper.*

"It's going to kill me if you don't do something!"

*Don't stop. I'm going to come.*

Suddenly, Harold was all action. He didn't even stop to think about what he was going to do. He grabbed the straw broom, and in one swift motion he'd later be hard pressed to remember doing, broke the handle over his raised knee. He charged forward, and wedging the splintered shaft between victim and prey, pried the spider loose. It fell to the ground with a loud thud and rolled onto its back. As it was struggling to right itself, Harold moved into position and raised the broom handle above his head, preparing to deliver the deathblow. He hesitated, but only for a second. The spider flipped over, and unleashing an inhuman howl, Harold thrust the sharpened end of the broken handle into its oversized cranium. It pierced the hairy skin and a green, viscous fluid began to seep out of the mortal wound.

The spider slumped forward, dead; its eight legs jerking spasmodically in the final throes of death.

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Breathing heavily and shaking violently, Harold stepped back from the corpse. He couldn't believe he had just killed it. He didn't know he had it in him. Like the junkie who needed his fix, he *had* been capable of anything after all.

"Harold, thank God." Louise said, relaxing against the webbing and breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank you. Now get me the fuck down from here. Sparkles, too."

Harold happily freed her, and with reluctance, the precious Sparkles. While she was taking a shower to wash away the grime and horror of the encounter in the basement, he cleaned up the mess said encounter had left behind. He was glad the failed plan had called for such precautions as the plastic on the floor and his wearing the gloves and rain slicker. It made the job all the more easier. He shoved the remains of the giant spider in one garbage bag and folded up the messy industrial sheet of plastic into another. He carried both to the curb and wondered with wry amusement what the garbage man would think if the bag carrying the giant spider tore open as it was being hefted into the back of the disposal truck, the impossible contents spilling out. It was no longer any of his concern and he smiled to himself as he walked back up the path that led to his front door.

As he approached the house, the smile faded from his face as he saw a spectacle almost as inexplicable as the giant spider had been. Hundreds of spiders of varying size, shape and breed were fleeing from his home like refugees escaping a war zone. They left through cracks and fissures in the concrete foundation and countless other openings that only bugs seem able to locate. They marched across the hard, white snow, and although a large number of them did indeed freeze to death, a portion of the larger, sturdier ones managed to make it to what Harold always thought of as their sanctuary in the hedges that cornered this part of the house.

Harold forced himself to smile and wished them well, but there was a part of him that was wary and couldn't help but wonder what kind of impact their departure would have.

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However, the following weeks were as close to perfect as Harold could ever have imagined them to be. He made love to Louise at least three times a week and she stopped going out with her ‘girlfriends’ altogether. She ceased using his credit card behind his back or demanding he purchase things for her directly. She helped with meal preparation and they enjoyed watching TV together, especially the reality shows. She took over her fair share of the chores, including cleaning out Sparkles’ litter box. They talked more, getting along better than they had since that night at O’Malley’s.

A month after the incident with the giant spider, the two of them lay in bed together. Harold was fast asleep, snoring loudly. Sparkles was resting on Louise’s stomach. A low creak came from the bedroom door as it slowly swung open to admit a horde of nocturnal monstrosities – ants, earwigs, cockroaches and flies simultaneously crawled and flew into the room. The buzzing and clicking sound they made was audible as their numbers ranged in the thousands. They made their way to the bed and descended upon it.

A small, humanoid monster, it’s existence as unbelievable as the giant spider’s had been, moved toward Sparkles, it’s coal-black eyes staring intently at the feline. It held a rudimentary dagger in a taloned hand. Sensing the danger it presented, Sparkles stopped purring and hissed at it loudly.

“Hey!” Louise whispered, trying her best to sound forceful without waking up Harold. “Remember what we agreed upon.”

The creature took one last look at Sparkles and shrugged it’s shoulders indifferently. It left the cat alone, turning toward Harold’s slumbering form, as had all of the other bugs and insects that had entered the room. Meat was meat, after all.

And a deal was a deal.

## **THE END**

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## **Tale #6**

### **Don't Point**

Lacy gave herself a good looking over in the bathroom mirror, and after the unbuttoning of one more button on her blouse, felt all systems were go. Her interview was at 1 and she couldn't afford to not pull out all the stops. She didn't look like a slut, but gave the impression an office quickie was always a possibility. She was, even after all of the abuse (both self-afflicted and otherwise, both literally and figuratively), a relatively attractive woman. She may no longer be hot enough to hold the gaze of the bleary-eyed barflies at *Ricky's Rockin' All-Girl Review*, but she knew she still had the chops to be among the most talked about secretaries around the water cooler. And if that didn't land her the secretarial gig, nothing would. At least that was what she hoped, because her experience in the field was next to none.

She left the bathroom, took her 4-year old son Cole's hand and locked the door of her cheap motel room behind her.

"Remember, baby, this is a big day for mommy so I want you to be on your best behavior, okay?"

Little Cole nodded and smiled back up at his mom, squinting in the bright early afternoon light.

"Good boy. C'mon, let's grab the bus downtown."

Lacy had seen the add looking for an experienced secretary in the newspaper classifieds and replied by phone immediately. She had no relevant experience, but bullshited her way through the phone interview well enough that the man in charge asked her to come in the next day for a face to face. He said it was so he could tell her all the pertinent details of the position, and if he liked what he saw, offer her the job on the spot. Lacy had no doubt he meant if he liked what he saw in her resume, but she was hoping he would like what he saw just below her blouse and short skirt (black lace bra and sheer, thigh-high stockings) a whole lot more. There wasn't much in her resume for a man in his position to like. Nothing that



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pertained to a secretarial job, at least. Pole dance expertise didn't quite translate to having the ability to take dictation. She hoped he liked what he saw enough to forget about the whole *experience necessary* part of the job description in the paper.

She hoped so because without this job she was dead.

And she wasn't speaking metaphorically.

If she didn't have at least the possible means of paying Rockin' Ricky back the 13 thousand she owed him, she was finished. Electrical tape would be placed over her mouth. A garbage bag would be thrown over her head and her wrists would be bound behind her back. She'd be taken out into the woods, told to get on her knees and then shot in the back of the head. A couple more bullets for good measure would surely follow. At least, that was how they did it in the movies. She had no reason to figure Ricky's boys would be any more original. Terry and Sonny were the most unoriginal men she'd ever had to give a free lap dance to during her employment at the *All Girl Review*. 'Shake it, baby', was all they were ever able to muster.

The bus was crowded with travelers on their lunch break, but Lacy and little Cole were fortunate enough to get a seat up front. The man with the large mass growing off of his nose and standing next to them was not so lucky. The growth was about the size of a golf ball and purple in color. Lacy found it revolting and tried her best not to stare. Cole, on the other hand, was just a child, and like all children, could be counted on to have no such brain-to-mouth filter.

"Mommy, what's wrong with that man's face?" He said, pointing to their traveling companion.

"Cole!" Lacy said, swatting at her son's hand. "You hush up now. It's not polite to point. Don't ever point at another person's ailments, do ya hear me?"

"But mom..." He began to plead.

"No 'but's' about it, mister. Just keep that stuff to yourself from now on if you want your ice cream."

"Yes'm."

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The rest of the bus ride was uneventful. Cole amazingly kept his mouth shut like she had told him to. The six-block walk to the office was, in Lacy's opinion, an extreme success. Everyone on the street gave her the eye and she knew the outfit, and how she just barely fit into it, would land her the job. It was hot and she felt the sweat starting to form on her forehead. She was worried about ruining her makeup if she started dabbing at the dampness now and figured what the hell, maybe it would help her chances after all. Give her that wet n' wild look, perhaps. She refrained from wiping it away.

But she didn't get the job. The man she spoke with on the phone the day before, who had been so pleasant then, kept looking away from her now. He was unable to make eye contact, even with her cleavage, and latched upon the fact that she had no previous experience like a mongrel dog and refused to let go. No, sorry, she just wasn't what they were looking for, after all. The whole process lasted about 15 minutes.

Afterwards, walking back to the bus stop, with a quick side trip to the ice cream stand for Cole's promised treat, Lacy couldn't figure out how it all went so wrong. The people on the street continued to give her a good looking over, as did the acne-riddled teenage brat who sold her the fudge cone. Everyone on the bus ride home did so as well. No one said anything, but she saw or felt their glances just the same. She couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. The man must've been gay, that's all there was to it. Or worse, married. Or, the hardest nut to crack of all, RELIGIOUS.

Back at the hotel room, Lacy left little Cole on the bed to happily eat his ice cream while she made her way into the bathroom for some peace and quiet. She needed time to figure out a new course of action. But mainly she needed a smoke and had promised herself that she would never light up around her kid. Living out of suitcases and having a wannabe mobster on your ass? Well, no one was perfect. Without the job, all she could do now was run and hope Ricky's goons never found her or her son.

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Thoughts of escape, of her son and even of the goons no doubt being dispatched to get her at that very moment, fled when she flicked on the bathroom light and saw her reflection in the mirror. The small, blue blemish on her forehead had reappeared. She had covered it over with foundation before leaving that morning, but now it was back. The heat, and the sweat it generated, probably washed the concealing makeup away. It had been visible all day long! It had been visible in the interview! The blemish had tripled in size and split open sometime during the morning, probably before she made it to the office downtown. She had mistaken the thick, syrupy pus that seeped from it for sweat and the yellow substance now coated the entire upper portion of the left side of her forehead. She looked horrible. She looked *diseased*.

Why hadn't anyone told her? Why hadn't Cole warned her? Why hadn't he...?

And then the answer came to her as she recalled admonishing him for pointing at the man on the bus with the purple, bulbous growth on his nose.

'Never point at another person's ailments, ya hear me?' She had scolded him. And he had listened. For crissake's, the little shit had finally listened. He never listened to his mother. What a fucking wonderful time to start.

There was a knock at the door, and although she told him never to answer it, he got up off of the bed, melting ice cream in hand, and did so anyways. Apparently he hadn't learned to listen to his mother that much after all.

Lacy's blood ran cold when she heard the familiar sound of Terry's growling voice.

"Hiya, kid. Is your mom here?"

# The Innocent Janitor

## **The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror**

*For Clive Barker*

Frank Kranitz is special.

In his time he's been called a number of other, less than pleasant things – dumb, retarded, mentally challenged, dim-witted, a few cards shy of a full deck, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, below average, unintelligent, fucking moronic and even *slow*.

But Frank Kranitz prefers special.

It's easy to see why people come to this conclusion. Frank is 6 feet, 8 inches tall and nearly 300 hundred pounds of pure muscle. His wide shoulders hunch as he walks. A nervous twitch causes him to continuously clench his massive hands unless they are otherwise kept occupied. His sloping forehead, dented in a few places from a viscous beating administered as a child by a father who took offense to a partially closed container of juice, looks ape-like. His mouth is always slightly ajar. Not in order to 'catch flies', as many have noted, but because of his labored breathing caused by his massive bulk. His eyes, with mismatching blue and brown irises, have a vacant look to them due more to his introspective nature than his sub-standard level of intelligence. Often lost in his own, harmless thoughts, Frank repeatedly needs to be brought back to reality. A simple nudge on the shoulder will suffice, but many choose to snap their fingers in his face as if he is a mongrel dog instead. Frank never gets upset with them. He returns their patronizing actions with a smile that makes him appear docile and foolish, when in actuality he's just happy. At 27 years of age, Frank has never started a fight in his life, even though he could mop the floor with anyone who chooses to address him by any of the colorful adjectives already mentioned. But not if they call him special.

Frank Kranitz prefers special.

He grasps what most others grasp; it just takes him a little longer to get there. His IQ may be below average, but then again the average IQ isn't that great to begin with. He enjoys movies like *Star Wars* and cartoons like *Transformers* not because of their inherent simplicity,

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but because they're a lot of fun to watch. He enjoys the music they play on the local classic rock radio station and can discern the different sonic complexities of a Pink Floyd song versus an AC/DC tune, but couldn't care less. He plays air guitar to either one regardless. His favorite book, the one he has read above all others, is Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Although in the eyes of others he is similar to Lenny Small, he feels more akin with the character of George Milton. He likes to think the way George befriended and helped Lenny is akin to the many relationships he has forged with the students at Packard Consolidated Elementary and High School while working there as the custodian. It's a big school in a small town, a limited budget grouping all the grades under one roof, and he gladly keeps things clean for all of them.

He's been the janitor ever since he himself graduated from its lime-colored halls. If he thinks about it, he's been at the school forever, having completed grades 1 through every other until taking the job. Some grades took more than one go around. He could have gone to community college with the grades he was able to muster, but he could never have afforded it. His parent's paltry income barely covered the constant flow of alcohol that ran through their house with none left over to put towards any form of post-secondary education for their only son. Whatever cash he was able to earn performing odd jobs in the neighborhood, usually of the general labor variety, was spent on groceries. Unlike his folks, he couldn't exist on a steady diet of beer and vodka alone.

Upon the insistence of Elizabeth Horton, the kindly school guidance counselor, the principal, Porter Johnson, reluctantly hired Frank after graduation because the then current custodian, Jeremy Dobbs, was nearing the end of his long run and needed an extra hand more often than not. Jeremy took Frank under his wing, mentoring him, and became a close friend along the way. He retired three years later, just as Elizabeth Horton transferred to another school district. With his beneficiaries gone, Frank's position would have been in jeopardy, but for Principal

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Johnson's misinterpreting his dupability and deciding to keep him only if his salary was cut in half.

Frank may be slow, but he knows he's being ripped off. He also knows there are a number of avenues he can take to complain. But he doesn't bother. Principal Johnson assumes it's because he's feeble-minded, but in actuality it's because he loves his job. And with a monthly settlement from, ironically, his parents' untimely death at the hands of another drunk driver, he doesn't need the money. Frank also loves the school. He always has. When he was younger and his parents were still alive, it provided a temporary respite from them and their abuses. Although his classmates were cruel, they were never as bad as the two people who were supposed to love and care for him. He loves the students, too. It's an oversimplification to say he bonds well with them because, although twice their age, he shares their level of intelligence. He gets along with them because, with no children of his own, he has taken on the role of the father figure he never had growing up. He listens to their problems, offers a sympathetic ear, and whenever possible, helpful advice. He horsies around with them only when it is appropriate to do so and treats them as equals when most of the faculty only sees them as children at best and juvenile delinquents at worst.

He spends time with them outside of school hours as well, often running into them at the local Cineplex. He treats them to popcorn and sodas and often lingers with them after the show to discuss the merits or lack thereof of whatever they had just seen. Frank loves the movies. Like the school itself, the theater was a sanctuary from home as a boy.

The kids love Frank, too. He's the coolest adult they know. Based on their sincere and heartfelt testimonials, coupled with the lack of any actual evidence to the contrary, the parents concerned with the closeness of the janitor to their children acquiesced and ceased demanding of the school board that they monitor his interactions or dismiss him altogether.

So yes, Frank aligns himself more with George in the Steinbeck classic. However, in the dreams he's been

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having lately, he acts more like Lenny. Although in the dreams he's killing innocent children, not cute, defenseless bunnies.

Each night the dream is relatively the same. Only minor variations in detail separate one night's terror from the next. He always finds himself in the same dank place. It is a circular room full of dark and shadowy recesses. The muffled sound of crashing waves can be heard just beyond the rotting walls with the peeling paint. Dust, dirt and webs cover most everything. Spiders and other bugs skitter and scurry about. Patches of bronze rust are prevalent, as are many sections of green, moldy fungus. There appears to be no ceiling, yet a set of splintering, unstable wooden steps lead up and up and up into an impenetrable darkness. The dirty stone floor is damp and cold.

The setting is consistent, but the players vary. At times it is a young boy lain out on the stone floor and other times a girl. One is bludgeoned to death with a hammer while another suffocates against the plastic bag thrown over their head. A young girl is disemboweled and a pair of twin boys has their throats slashed. The section of flesh removed from each victim, cut away with a dirty paring knife, differs in each dream as well. At times it's the skin of a small wrist or an ankle. Other times it comes from the forearm or buttocks. Or the nose. Or forehead. Or stomach. Or back. Sections that, when placed together, would form a horrific Frankensteinian whole.

Mercilessly, the dream never ends there. The bodies are cut up, placed into several garbage bags and taken outside. Sometimes the day is sunny; more often than not it is overcast and drizzling. Sometimes it's night. The air is always damp. The bags are dragged across a short section of ground that is covered with patches of dead and dying grass. A precipice is reached and from its edge a number of heavy rocks are added to each bag to weigh it down. They are then unceremoniously pitched over into the surf below. Just before the last bag splashes



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down and begins its steady descent to the ocean floor, Frank wakes up screaming.

It takes him a long time to calm down. It's usually hours before he can fall asleep again, if he manages to get back to sleep at all. It never comes without crying. He sobs into his large pillow, barely able to catch the breath that hitches in his throat. He wrenches his sheets in his massive, calloused hands. His whole body convulses. His stomach muscles start to hurt from the spasms and a blinding migraine begins to form behind his bloodshot, discolored eyes. On more than one occasion he has had to dash into the nearby bathroom to vomit.

It has gotten to the point where he is almost too terrified to sleep. He knows he should talk to somebody, but he's afraid it might cost him his job. Too many parents have trouble trusting him as it is. So he tries desperately to find a positive angle with which to hold on to. They aren't kids he grew up with, even the ones who ceaselessly picked on him. These dreams aren't sick, subconscious revenge fantasies against the kids of his past. They aren't repressed, disturbing yearnings against the kids of his present, either. None of the kids in the dream are familiar. Not one of them attends, or has attended, Packard Consolidated Elementary and High School during his lengthy time there both as student or employee. There is no plausible or rational explanation why the dreams are attacking his psyche and tormenting his soul.

Even though he forgoes talking to anyone because of the fear of losing his job, his performance of late has declined to the point where he may lose it anyway. At first the nightmares, sporadic in their occurrences, hadn't had a negative impact on Frank's day-to-day life. But as they increased in both frequency and ferocity, it became harder and harder for their aftershocks to be free of any repercussions. Frank is lucky if he manages to get 10 to 12 hours of peaceful slumber a week. He has become increasingly late for work and caught on numerous occasions nodding off. Luckily, he is so far the only one aware of the sleepwalking. Or, more accurately, the *sleepworking* - once even while operating dangerous, heavy

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machinery. After an extremely scary situation involving a large industrial riding mower and a group of students playing a game of soccer on an unkempt section of field, Franks requests a few days off for “personal reasons”. It’s granted, but without pay.

That first night off, caught again in the grip of a terrible nightmare, Frank breaks free from the horror and awakes screaming. He turns on the bedside lamp and what greets him elicits another shout. His bed sheets, laundered only two days before, are stained red in several places. There are droplets, streaks and even a vague scarlet handprint. It takes his mind, no matter how slow it may actually operate, only a second to know it is blood. In another second he assumes it isn’t his. In the familiar nightmare, another child was being butchered. The idea that he may have been sleepwalking and actually committing the crime instead of conjuring the scenario in his brain while he slept terrifies him more than anything ever has before. More than the torments of his youth at the hands of his peers. More than having an unloving, alcoholic mother. More than the abusive father with a short temper and strong fists. Frank is paralyzed by the possibility that, however abhorrent the concept, he may be responsible, albeit unconsciously, of performing the heinous acts of which he’s been dreaming. That they aren’t projections, but recollections.

It isn’t until he opens his tightly clenched fists and sees the 10 semi-circle cuts, five crescent moons on each palm, that he realizes and accepts the fact that the blood is actually his own. But the possibility of his own guilty involvement has already taken root in his mind, and even if the blood staining his sheets tonight isn’t that of an innocent child, there’s always the possibility that next time it will be. No matter how incapable he thinks himself of committing such atrocious deeds; the fact that the dreams have been plaguing him week after week may indicate there’s something inside of him that he may soon not be able to control. Something so dark his conscious mind rebels against its very existence. Something so insidious it

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refuses to remain buried. Something so evil it cannot be denied forever.

No longer concerned with losing his job, Frank calls his family doctor at 9 a.m., the minute the clinic opens its doors for the day. Due to the forceful persistence of a patient usually so accommodating and calm, his physician's receptionist agrees to squeeze him in the next day even though there wasn't an open availability for another month.

Frank breathes a sigh of relief and hangs up the receiver. He makes a cup of coffee and sits at the small table in his cramped kitchenette. He opens the newspaper and goes straight to the movie listings. With the preliminary step towards what he hopes will be a full recovery set in motion, there is nothing left to do but wait. His family doctor can refer him to a psychiatrist and they can fix whatever is broken in his brain. Whatever cylinders aren't firing properly can be amended. In the meantime, to take his mind off of things, he plans on spending the day at the cinema.

Frank knows he's doing the right thing. He knows that tomorrow will be better.

What he doesn't know is that by the end of the day he'll be dead.

It's the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the week and the theater is deserted. Frank sits in the center of the auditorium, surrounded by empty seats. As much as he loves a packed theater on the opening night of some summer blockbuster, feeling the energy of the crowd and possibly running into a group of kids from the school, he also enjoys it when he has the place all to himself. Every now and again it's fun to trade the crowd's reaction and possible discussion afterwards for the feeling that the giant screen and Dolby Digital surround sound is there for him and him alone. At those times the theater becomes a private sanctuary and he loves it.

Today is not one of those times. Today a crowd would help distract him more than the images on the

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screen have been able to do so far. The film offers very little in the way of entertainment. He avoided choosing a number of horror films playing on other screens in preparation for the Halloween crowds, including the new *Slice N' Dice* picture, because he's had to deal with enough death in the past few weeks to last a lifetime. A dismembered teen on film can only serve to remind him of the dismembered kids in his dreams. He opts instead for a lightweight romantic comedy that turns out to be even more inane than the latest entry in the popular slasher franchise probably is.

Bored, Frank shifts uncomfortably in his seat, trying to keep himself occupied since the insipid and unentertaining movie is failing to accomplish the task. Around the 30 minute mark, when it becomes painfully obvious, even to him, which suitor the pretty girl will choose and which one will get his comeuppance, the screen suddenly turns to static. The suddenness of the shift, along with the loud blast of white noise that accompanies it, refocuses his attention to the movie screen and away from the morbid thoughts his mind had been trying not to dwell upon. He tries to remember the last scene to see if this could possibly be a part of the story, perhaps the beginning of a shot that will pan back from a television set to reveal the unemployed protagonist asleep on the couch before it. But no, already the shot has lasted too long, especially with the loud, unbearable soundtrack. No film would purposefully include a scene such as this. Well, maybe a David Lynch art film would, but certainly not the latest Gary Marshal love-fest.

After a moment, the problem still unresolved, Frank begins to wonder if something bad could have happened to the projectionist in the booth above and behind him. Perhaps they had a heart attack or fell and hit their head. Perhaps they were hurt and needed his help. However, concern for that man or woman's well being is quickly replaced with confusion. Frank has been to hundreds of movies in his lifetime and has observed many technical difficulties, from the image being out of focus to its being misaligned with the canvas screen, to an audio

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track being out of synch with the picture and to an actual strip of celluloid melting during the climactic scene of a particularly bad war movie. In the latter case, the screen was simply bathed in a bright light. There was no image of static or any abrasive soundtrack. That only happens with the television when the cable cuts out. Something is out of sorts here.

Confused, Frank turns in his seat, preparing to get up and ask about the interruption. He has a large smile on his face. This turn of events is far more interesting than the movie had been and gives him something more substantial to think about than the dead kids of his dreams.

When he discovers that one of those kids now occupies the previously vacant seat next to him, the smile is replaced with a countenance of downright terror.

The boy, maybe 6-years old, is obviously dead. He stares at Frank with milky, lifeless eyes. His skin, or at least what's left of it, is a light shade of blue with a greenish tint. Like the translucent skin, the body of the boy is also incomplete. His entire right arm is missing, simultaneously reminding Frank of the drummer for the rock band *Def Leppard* and the killer in the Harrison Ford movie *The Fugitive*. The boy's right leg is also missing, severed from the hip, and like the empty sleeve of his iron-on *Star Destroyer* T-shirt, his grimy shorts provide a now useless hole. His left leg is missing from the kneecap down, and on his left arm where his hand should be there is only a ragged, bloodless stump. His hair is filled with small twigs and several clods of dirt and sediment. It is wet, and water drips from his brow, down his face and falls from his nose and chin. His ragged clothes are also soaking, and a large puddle has formed on the movie theater floor where his feet would have been had he not been so viciously taken apart.

Instinctively, Frank knows those missing appendages are still in sealed garbage bags resting on the bottom of the ocean along the Atlantic coastline. This little dead boy from his nightmare, the one who was asphyxiated with a plastic grocery bag, has somehow managed to extricate himself from his watery grave and

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escape the realm of Frank's ever-increasing, twisted subconscious. Unless, of course, Frank is asleep now, slumped over in his uncomfortable theater chair, dreaming again. Then the boy would be right where he's supposed to be, however unwanted. Either option offers little comfort to Frank as he sits in the company of the diminutive corpse.

"Am I dreaming?" Frank asks, keeping his voice low as if to not disturb the other, non-existent moviegoers from enjoying a static-filled screen. "Have I fallen asleep?"

"No." The little boy says in a sweet, innocent voice that belies his horrific countenance. When he speaks, a mouthful of salt water pours from his mouth and splashes onto his lap. "This is just an intermission."

"I don't understand." Frank says. Initially confused by the voice so incongruous with the visage, he is slowly growing less terrified by the body beside him as his pity increases. And his curiosity.

"I don't either." The boy says, laughing gaily. "It's just what I was told to tell you."

"Told to tell me?" Frank echoes. "Who told you to tell me that?"

"Her."

"Who's 'her'?" Frank asks, his confusion rising with every question answered. "Do I know her? What does she want with me?"

"It's not you she's interested in. It's your other you."

"You're talking in riddles!" Frank says, growing more and more exasperated with each conversational volley.

"I like riddles. I like games." The boy says, laughing again. Water that had originally gushed from his mouth is now no more than a slimy trickle.

Although on the surface the little boy and what he says appear sinister and downright creepy, Frank senses no malice in him. He is what he appears to be - a young, playful boy, albeit a dead one. Trying to clear his mind, Frank decides to start all over again, hoping it will help clarify the odd situation. Even if his mind operated on an

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above-average level, he would still have trouble comprehending this bizarre chain of events.

"My name's Frank." He says, offering a hand to the young boy.

"I'm Sam." The boy says, raising his stump to remind Frank why he can't accept the proffered hand.

"Oh, jeez," Frank says, slapping his forehead. "That was stupid of me. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." The boy says, smiling. "It's not your fault. At least, not really."

"What's 'not really' my fault?"

"That I'm dead." The boy says, as easily as if he's commenting on being late for dinner. "I told her it wasn't you that did it but she says that doesn't matter. She says there's scales and stuff. Balances that need to be maintained. Rules and laws and a bunch of other things I don't understand."

"I don't understand any of this, either." Frank says. "Is it possible for me to ask her? Can I talk to her?"

"She's talking to you right now. Well, sorta."

"You're still talking in riddles." Frank says.

"I told ya I like 'em!" The boy responds, smiling broadly and revealing a ruined set of milk teeth. "What's red and green and red and green and red and green all over?"

"I don't know." Frank answers, not really caring about the answer but wanting to placate the child to ensure his continued assistance, however ineffective it has been so far. Plus, deep down, he really doesn't want to hurt Sam's feelings. He feels the kid has been through more hell already than anyone ever deserved.

"A frog in a blender!" Sam replies enthusiastically. "Yuck! Isn't that gross?"

The absurdity that a dead boy missing half of his skin and body parts would find the juvenile riddle disgusting is lost on Frank. He's too concerned with trying to steer the conversation back to the quest for an explanation of Sam's sudden appearance and his own predicament.

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“If she’s talking to me why can’t I hear her?” He asks.

“Because she’s not really talking to you. I’m talking to you. I’m talking to this you while she talks to the other you. I’m here to keep you company while she does so. Would you like to hear another riddle?”

“All you’ve said are riddles.” Frank says, growing more and more exasperated. A sense of self-preservation is beginning to kick in and he’s becoming less concerned with hurting Sam’s feelings and more concerned for his own sanity and well-being. “Can’t you help me at all?”

“He he he,” Sam giggles, not the least bit fazed by Frank’s newfound curtness. “Not really. I told ya already that I’m just here to keep you company while she conducts her business. How could I possibly help you? I’m just a kid, remember? Maybe when I’m more grown up I’ll be able to.”

That Sam will never grow up coupled with his innocent denial or ignorance of the fact breaks Frank’s heart. He looks into Sam’s dead eyes and thoughts of strangling him until the truth falls out are replaced with a burning desire to hold and protect him. That the time for such protection is long past fills Frank with a strong sense of impotent helplessness. Tears begin to spill from the corners of his discolored eyes and roll down his cheeks. For the boy. For himself.

“What’s going to happen to me?” He asks, his voice hitching between sobs.

It seems as if Sam is about to answer, with either valuable information or more childish inanity, before something stops him. A perceptible change in the temperature and a rise in the static electricity in the air around them halt his speaking. He cocks his head slightly to the left and listens to a disembodied voice only he can hear. As he listens, the sound of the static blasting from the theater’s surround sound speakers begins to diminish. The image on the canvas screen starts to fade in and out between the snow that has been projected there for the past few minutes and the movie it had interrupted. Sam’s apparition on the seat next to Frank correspondingly



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begins to flicker in and out of reality as well. What constitutes reality, however, is very much up for debate at this point.

"She's done." Sam says, turning his now semi-transparent face in Frank's direction. "And she's not happy."

"What does that mean?" Frank asks, equally terrified of the potential answer or the lack of one.

"I don't know." Sam says, fulfilling the latter of Frank's fears. He smiles weakly, almost apologetically. As he fades away completely, his final words are barely more than a whispered echo. "But she's not done with you yet. Either of you."

The dead boy is gone and the theater returns to normal. There is no sign of Sam having ever visited. The spot on the floor that had become a puddle is dry. The unoccupied chair has returned to its flipped back position to give patrons and cleaners the mobility to move in between the aisles to take their seats or sweep up discarded popcorn. The movie has returned to the spot Frank last remembers seeing, the film continuing to run through the reels of the projector above and behind him as if nothing had ever occurred to stop its steady progress.

Frank sits in a cold sweat, constantly needing to remind himself to breathe. His whole body is shaking. He swallows, the act requiring a maximum amount of effort. He's afraid to blink, as if even that split-second of absolute darkness will devour him whole.

When an usher enters the theater to check on the emergency exits, Frank shrieks. It's hard to say who frightens whom more. The usher, a 16-year old high school dropout, drops his small flashlight and utters a shriek of his own. Luckily, he doesn't recognize the big janitor who used to clean up after him in the dimness.

"Jesus Christ, man!" He says when he catches his breath. "You scared the shit outta me!"

"I'm sorry." Frank stammers, rising from his seat to exit the theater.

"Damn," the kid continues, bending over to pick up the fallen flashlight. "You'd think you were in the

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screening next door watching the new Slice, not this lame piece of shit.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Frank mumbles in response as he walks past the puzzled teenager and leaves.

“What’s his problem?” The kid asks no one in particular as the beam of the flashlight shines on the closing exits doors.

As he makes his hasty escape, Frank wonders the same thing about himself.

Frank drives from the theater downtown to his small town home in a state of mind that continually fluctuates between panic and shock. The trip would have normally taken him 15 minutes (Frank is a very cautious driver) but today he makes it in four. Although he clears the distance in a third of his normal travel time, the trip still seems to take forever. It’s as if he can’t drive fast enough.

Upon arriving home, he storms through the front door, not bothering to remove either his boots or the key from the lock. He makes a beeline to the kitchen and begins frantically rummaging through a basket of semi-crumpled sheets of paper, receipts, take-out menus and telephone numbers. He looks like a man searching for insulin at the onset of a diabetic seizure. He stops when he locates the number for the clinic. Even under the best of circumstances, he probably wouldn’t have thought of simply hitting the REDIAL button on the phone since he placed no other calls since the one made to the clinic that morning.

Holding the small sheet of paper with the number in his trembling left hand, it takes three attempts before he can successfully dial it with the trembling fingers on his right. When he finally gets through, it hurts his polite nature to bully his way past the receptionist to speak with someone in more of a position to help. The receptionist tells him his doctor is too busy at the moment dealing with another patient, but her assistant will only be slightly less

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inconvenienced and can be on the line in just a few moments. Frank fails to grasp her sarcasm.

Like the ride home, those few moments seem to stretch into an eternity. Frank stands in his small kitchen, gripping the receiver of the phone in his massive, vise-like grip. If he wasn't breathing so heavily he could have heard the stress of the black plastic phone reaching the breaking point. It would have shattered in his fist if it had taken Rebecca O'Brien a second longer than the five minutes it did take her to get on the line. When she finally does, Frank's knees buckle and he falls back into the chair that is luckily right behind him.

"Please, Mr. Kranitz, you'll have to slow down." Rebecca says, her voice gentle, calm and caring. "I can't help you if I can't find out what's wrong with you."

"Please help me." Frank says, consciously trying to tone down his mounting hysteria. As he curtails his mania, the floodgates on his despair are thrown wide open and he begins to sob incessantly.

"Please, Mr. Kranitz, try to calm down." Rebecca says, having as hard a time deciphering him through the tears as she was his manic gibberish.

"Frank. Call me Frank. Everyone calls me that."

"Okay, Frank, you can call me Rebecca. Now, what can I do for you?"

Being on a first-name basis seems to calm Frank's nerves. Somewhat. They are still frayed past the point of no return, but for the moment they are at least a little bit manageable.

"I think I'm going crazy." He says, the tears continuing to flow down the sides of his face.

"What do you mean by that, Frank?" Rebecca says, asking as if she's talking to a man on the edge of a very high building who is threatening to jump off. As far as she knows, maybe he is. "You'll have to be more specific."

"I keep dreaming things. Horrible things. They keep dying. I try to stop it. I want to stop it, but I can't. I'm too late. They die in the most horrible ways and I can't turn away. I have to watch."

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“They’re only dreams.” Rebecca says on the other end of the line, her voice sounding too far away for Frank’s liking. “They’re only dreams and they can’t hurt you.”

“They’re not just dreams. Not anymore. I saw one of them today. A boy. A dead boy. He spoke to me at the movies. God, I wanted to help him, but I was already too late.”

“Please, Mr. Kran... Frank, calm down. Everything’s going to be okay.” Rebecca says, recognizing the rising hysteria in Frank’s voice and trying to sooth it away as best she can.

As she tries to calm him, another part of her mind is busy trying to figure out her best course of action. With some trepidation, she decides to let the answers to her next set of questions determine whether or not to send the police to the address on Frank’s file, or try to bring him in by herself. He’s looking for help now, if the police kick down his door all hope to save the poor man might be lost forever.

“Frank,” Rebecca continues, choosing her words very carefully, delivering them in equally measured tones. “Did you hurt any of these kids? Have you done anything bad to them?”

“No,” Frank says, sobbing. “No, I don’t think so. I hope not. But why am I seeing these things if I hadn’t? Why is this happening to me?”

“I don’t know.” Rebecca says. “But I need you to listen to me very carefully. I need you to answer two questions for me. I need you to answer them as truthfully as you can, no matter how hard it might be. Can you do that for me, Frank?”

“Yes.” Frank replies, his voice now no more than a hoarse whisper.

“Good. Now, do you think you’re going to hurt anyone soon? Do you feel the urge to hurt someone right now?”

“No.”

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“Very good. Secondly, do you feel like you’re going to do anything bad to yourself? Do you feel like hurting yourself to make these bad dreams go away?”

“No.” Frank says vehemently. “I want them to go away, but I don’t want to hurt myself. I don’t want to hurt anyone. I just want to get better!”

“Okay,” Rebecca says. “That’s what I’m going to help you do. What I need you to do is get in your car and come here right away. Don’t stop for anything, just come here right away.”

“I can stop for traffic lights, though, right?” Frank asks sincerely.

“What?” Rebecca says, and then laughs. She’s surprised to discover just how tense the conversation has made her. “Of course, stop for the traffic lights. But otherwise come straight here, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Rebecca.”

“You’re welcome, Frank. We’ll see you soon.”

Frank hangs up the phone, and halfway across town at the clinic Rebecca O’Brien does the same. As Frank makes ready to leave the house, she goes to the drug supply cabinet and retrieves a bottle of Thorazine in anticipation of his arrival.

But Frank isn’t going to go to the clinic. He isn’t going to go to the police. As he looks around his kitchen for the set of car keys he left dangling from the front door, the phone rings. He picks up the receiver like the man in a hurry that he is, but before he can even briskly ask who is speaking, a high-pitched scream explodes from the earpiece. Frank’s face crumples into a grimace at the sudden sonic assault, but a more somber demeanor quickly replaces the upset one.

The scream on the other end of the line is like a dog whistle. Frank can’t decipher it because it isn’t meant for him. It is directed to the someone, or something, inside of him that the dead boy Sam referred to as ‘the other you’.

It is this ‘other’ Frank who is in control now, slamming the receiver in the cradle. Behind the wheel of Frank’s car, he turns right as he pulls out of the driveway

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instead of the left to get to the clinic. At the end of the street he fails to break at the stop sign and almost runs over two small kids playing ball. He cackles as they quickly scurry to the safety of the sidewalk.

It is the manic laugh of a man pursued.

Later, Frank jolts to not knowing where he is, what he's doing there, or why. He quickly surveys his surroundings and finds he is standing in a long line of people in a crowded, cold building. Floor to ceiling plexi-glass windows make up one far wall where a number of other lines have formed at intervals of about 12 feet. At the head of each queue is a pneumatic door beneath a digital sign. Each sign announces a variety of cities – New York, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto and Montreal.

Frank takes a half step out of his own line and peers past the dozen or so people ahead of him. The sign above his door reads 'Boston'. He gives his head a shake, hoping to clear his thoughts like an Etch-A-Sketch. He thinks the more he shakes it the more likely the chance an answer will rise to the surface like a nugget of gold in a prospector's pan. It doesn't. The answer remains elusive in the fog of his recent memory.

He looks down at his hand and sees the bus ticket everyone else in line must also be holding. He has no recollection of purchasing it, just as he has no recollection of coming here. But by putting two and two together in his slow fashion, he realizes he must be at the Greyhound Bus Depot downtown.

"Excuse me?" He says, tapping the woman ahead of him on the shoulder. When she turns he realizes he has no idea what he was planning on asking her, or even how this stranger could have helped in any way if he had. "Sorry, never mind."

The petulant child in the woman's charge uses the temporary interruption to start wailing again, the boredom of waiting to board the coach driving the young girl insane.

"Shhhhh, honey." The woman, more than likely her mother, says. "Use your 'inside' voice."

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It's the patronizing thing most parents say to children who misbehave in public when they can't say what they'd really like to.

The young girl continues to wail and her screams trigger a memory in Frank's mind. A memory of picking up the phone and hearing a similar sound. It's the last thing he remembers. He was supposed to go to the clinic to see Rebecca for help, but instead he came... here. He came here, purchased a ticket for Boston, got in line and... woke up. Frank gives his head another shake and steps out of the queue. The child's screams are starting to give him a headache, making it harder to concentrate than usual.

"If you get outta this line I ain't gonna let you cut back in." A shrill voice says from behind him.

"Pardon me?" Frank says, turning around. "Are you talking to me?"

"Damn right." The obese woman standing directly behind him says. "I'm not holding your spot for ya if you get outta this line."

Frank looks past her and down the line at the 20 or so other people waiting to get on the bus. He can't see how his being there would delay the woman's boarding anymore than another 30 seconds. He forces himself to be polite to her nonetheless.

"That's okay, ma'am. You don't have to hold my spot."

"I wasn't gonna anyways. Didn't ya hear what I just said? Are ya slow or something?" She lifts her bag from the dirty floor and shuffles forward a step, taking Frank's spot before he has even completely vacated it. She nudges him out of the way without an apology.

Frank makes his way down the long building towards the exit doors at the far back on the left. He stops halfway there and throws the bus ticket into a waste receptacle beside the bathroom door. The can is to one side of the door while on the other is a large, wall-sized poster filled with pictures of smiling faces taken during better days. Written across the top of the poster in big, bold red letters is the word MISSING. Below are a number of photographs, some in color, others in black and

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white and a few with age enhancement inserts, of missing children. Frank stares at the kids staring back at him from the poster and his heart skips a beat when he realizes one is especially familiar.

Frank leans in closer to read the information below a blurry, black and white grade school photograph, a shiver running down his spine.

### **SAMUEL THOMAS – AGE 6 –**

Missing since January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1984. Last seen wearing a pair of blue shorts, white sneakers and a red *Star Wars* T-Shirt with an iron-on design. If you have any information regarding this case please contact...

Frank slowly does the math in his head and realizes Sam has been missing for almost 15 years. No doubt anyone who ever held onto the hope that he is still alive has long given up. What his face is still doing on a current missing children poster is beyond Frank. He doesn't know that if anyone else were to bother to look they would see some other unfortunate boy or girl instead. For Frank, the image is Sam's. He looks closer and sees that every image on the poster is a familiar visage from his dreams.

"Jesus Christ." He mumbles, staggering backwards from the depressing display. His large bulk bumps into an old man and almost knocks him over.

"Watch where you're going, you clumsy oaf." He rasps.

"Sorry." Frank apologizes. He walks past him, ignoring his scowl, through the exit doors and into the large parking lot.

The late afternoon sun is still somewhat bright and hurts his eyes. But already it is nearing the Western horizon and dusk will come soon. As much as Frank just wants to go home, he needs to make it to the clinic before it closes. He pulls his keys out of his pocket and presses the button that sets off his car alarm. The kids at school chipped in and bought him the fancy key ring for his last



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birthday after he couldn't find his car a number of times in the parking lot.

His car announces itself with a bleat of the horn and Frank jogs to it. The door was left unlocked and he climbs in. The radio, preset to his favorite classic rock radio station - WKIT - is playing Warren Zevon's 'Werewolves of London'. The song ends and Frank is about to reverse out of the parking lot when the station identification is cut short by a sharp burst of static followed by an unwanted, but familiar scream.

Frank screams in return. When the 'other' Frank answers the summons and rises to the surface to take control, his screaming doesn't stop. The somber demeanor that marked his first appearance is no longer apparent. In fact, the pain evidenced in his face is even worse than the 'real' Frank's had been. Whatever it is seems to affect him more negatively. Blood begins to ooze out of every orifice. It hangs in globs from his nostrils and mouth and trickles like a leaky faucet from the corners of his eyes and the lobes of his ears. It spills and stains his clothes.

It only ceases to flow when, with sticky, blood-coated hands, he backs the car out of the lot and pulls onto the nearby highway, heading east.

To the coast.

'They' drive down the I-95 for close to an hour before turning off the eastbound exit onto Dixon. From there they ride for another 20 minutes, sailing past nothing but open farmer's fields and canted telephone poles, before coming across their first landmark – a small, mom and pop roadside vegetable and fruit stand. Run by Paul and Wendy Wilson, the place has been in operation for almost 40 years. The prices are reasonably cheap and the product relatively good, but their continued existence derives more from motorists' sense of tradition and nostalgia than anything practical. Who absolutely needs to pull over and get a bushel of ripe tomatoes while they traverse the highway, crossing state or country?

The thing operating Frank's car with Frank's body doesn't pull over, but when it passes the stand hocking agricultural commodities, a series of images and memories

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are triggered that, for the ‘real’ Frank trapped within, begins to explain the situation. Unlike the time when he blacked out between house and bus depot, the thing high-jacking his body has now less of a grip on his consciousness. Frank, a passenger within himself, cannot guide his limbs to take control of the vehicle, but is at least aware this time, no matter how frustrating it is. The images and memories that begin to flash through his mind are not his own. They belong to the thing operating the car and Frank, unable to block them any more than he can take control of the wheel, can only sit back and watch them unfold. It’s like the in-flight movie during a trip to hell.

*It began when a school bus full of kids passed Paul and Wendy’s vegetable and fruit stand. Frank barely catches a glimpse of it as it recedes in the distance, seen through the eyes of the person who lived these memories. At the time, that person was more interested in the little girl with the blond curls and pink dress four seats in front of him. He could care less that his friend, Davey Hunter, gave the couple selling the carrots and apples the middle finger.*

*“Did ya see that, Billy!” Davey said, laughing. “I flipped that bitch off and her old man sure did look pissed.”*

*“Yeah, that was great.” Billy, through whose eyes Frank now experiences the world of the past, said in a far away voice. “He was pissed, all right.”*

*But Billy hadn’t seen the old man at all. He barely saw Davey give his wife the bird. All he could see were the pale white legs of the 8-year old girl in front of him. Her dress hung low but rode up when she turned in her seat to talk with the boy behind her. For a split-second, her dirty, knobby knees were exposed. Billy thought the dress would keep rising until her panties, which he envisioned as being pink to match her dress, came into view. But it didn’t. However, the excitement at the prospect caused his breath to catch in his throat and gave him an instantaneous hard-on. He quickly covered up the bulge in his pants with the folder of papers one of the teacher’s handed to all of the students as they got on the bus.*

*The papers included a bunch of historical information on the lighthouse they were taking the field trip to see, and the scientific information related to how it works and why it exists. The fact that it was one of the first automated, unmanned lighthouses in the country*

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*was supposed to be some kind of big deal. The experience would be as boring as the academic blather on the sheets of paper now hiding Billy's burgeoning manhood, but it sure as hell beat Mr. D'Amour's mind numbingly dull algebra class. He and his friends signed up for the expedition to get out of that class and all the others they would normally have had to attend that day. Now, in a bus loaded to capacity with kids ranging from the third to twelfth grade, Billy was more interested in the 8-year old's underwear than playing bookey with his friends.*

*Billy was in the eleventh grade and was 17-years old.*

The car pulls off the paved road and onto a dirt one, its tires struggling to stay within the worn down wheel ruts made by past travelers. Grass growing in sporadic sections gives the impression that the most recent of these travelers had still been some time ago.

'Frank', or Billy, grips the wheel tighter, trying to maintain a steady course. The vehicle bumps and jostles him in the seat, and he grits Frank's teeth as he struggles to avoid getting stuck. The road, if you could call it that, never used to be this bad. He recalls it being a much smoother ride in his youth.

And as Billy recalls, Frank experiences.

*Billy found out, as discreetly as possible, that the young girl's name was Sally Renfield. She was 8-years old and in the third grade. She liked My little Pony and loved to smile.*

*Stealing the keys to the family Oldsmobile one night after his parents had gone to bed; he drove towards her house and parked under a large elm tree two blocks away. He knew which room was hers. He had been following her home from school every day since the field trip to the lighthouse the week before. He had come at night and watched through her window as her parents tucked her in by the light of a bedside lamp. She had a Strawberry Shortcake doll and a number of ugly Cabbage Patch Kids. It was warm then and her window was left open a crack. It was hot now and therefore most certainly left open wider.*

*It was, and he climbed in. The floor creaked under his weight, regardless of how stealthy he attempted to be. Sally didn't stir, nor was there any indication anyone else in the house had detected his*

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*presence. He stared at her sleeping below the Rainbow Brite poster above her bed and got another erection. He began rubbing himself through the fabric of his jeans. Not here. Not now. He forced himself to stop.*

*He padded softly towards her bed and reached down, gently picking her up. She grunted in protest but didn't wake up. Cradling her against his chest, he was sure that the pounding of his heart would surely wake her. It didn't. There was no way he could lower her from the window without disturbing her and alerting the entire neighborhood to his horrible crime. He had thought about this beforehand, specifically choosing that time of night because her parents went to bed, like clockwork, an hour before.*

*He made his way down the long hallway, ignoring the family portraits hanging on the walls, through the family room and out the front door. By the time he reached the Olds two blocks away, he was sweating profusely. The muscles in his arms ached and his lower back was on fire. He slid her onto the backseat, and very gently, but firmly, placed a strip of duct tape across her delicate mouth. Then, using his sister's jump rope, hog-tied her.*

*She was awake and began struggling against her restraints by the time Billy was behind the wheel. She was screaming muffled screams by the time he turned the ignition.*

*When he yelled at her to 'Shut the fuck up' she struggled and screamed more. By the time they reached the I-95, she was crying softly while he laughed and laughed and laughed.*

Billy pulls Frank's car to a stop a few meters from the condemned lighthouse. A more modern structure had been erected three miles up the coastline in the mid '80s to accommodate a change in the North Atlantic shipping lanes. Although it had been scheduled for demolition, budget cuts gave this lighthouse a stay of execution now going on over a decade. He gets out of the car, bringing Frank along with him, and struggles for a few minutes with the rusty steel door. He eventually wrenches it open, and a damp, dusty smell escapes the building and finds refuge in his nostrils. It's a nightmarishly familiar smell. He sneezes as he enters the circular space, the report echoing back at him. He walks to the center of the room and looks down at the brown stains coating the floor. At one time they had

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been bright red. Even under the circumstances, Billy stretches the muscles of Frank's face into a wide, shit-eating grin, and remembers fondly.

*He had drug Sally into the lighthouse and deposited her on the cold ground with every intention of raping her. He wanted to see her pussy, a real pussy, not the hairy things between the legs of the women in the magazines found hidden under his dad's bed. He wanted to do the things his friends lied about doing and he was too afraid to approach any of the girls in his class with doing. He wanted to lose his virginity. He wanted to be a man, even if it was at the expense of Sally's childhood.*

*But a funny thing happened when he tried. He reached down and put his hands under Sally's nightie and began to slip the panties off her kicking legs. At the exact same moment he noticed they were white, not pink, he lost his erection.*

*"What the fuck?" He grumbled. He lifted her dress and stared at the spot he had so desperately wanted to see he was willing to steal a child from her own bed to achieve. When nothing happened with his plumbing, he got even angrier.*

*"God dammit!" He shouted.*

*At the sound of his anguish, Sally cried and struggled more fiercely. In response, Billy struck her across the face with a strong backhand. And then another funny thing happened. It moved. When he hit her again, his dick started to stiffen. The third blow, thank God (if one can still believe in God in the face of such grand atrocities), rendered Sally unconscious and Billy hard as a rock.*

*By the time he was through with her, his boxer shorts filled with a sticky, salty mess, Sally was no more than a bruised, broken and bloody shell. If one was still thanking God for the little things, it was a blessing she died before Billy really started getting nasty.*

*Looking down at the body, Billy felt no remorse, only a strong sense of fulfilled self-gratification. He knew what he'd just done was monstrous, but oh, it was so much fun. Looking at the corpse, he no longer saw the young girl as an object of his desire, but a piece of evidence that needed to be disposed of. Quickly.*

*He went to the Oldsmobile with its spacious trunk and removed the hacksaw and heavy-duty garbage bags he had brought along for just that purpose.*

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*Whistling a happy tune, he returned to the lighthouse and started to clean up.*

The strength of Frank's revulsion at the horrific memories flickering through his mind's eye is what gives him the strength to regain control over his own body. Instead of utilizing the moment to flee, he doubles over, retching and vomiting all over the floor forever stained with the blood of countless kids.

He finally finishes, wiping his chin clean with the back of his hand. While in the prostrate position, he doesn't notice the gigantic monster appear out of nowhere behind him. Frank is a large man, but this creature dwarfs him. It is 8 feet tall and 3 feet wide, seemingly made out of the stones that comprise the surrounding walls from which it seems to materialize. Its head is the size and shape of a cinderblock and contains no discernable features. Its chest is wide, its arms and legs almost equally thick. Cracks and fissures seem to demarcate the joints. As it slowly takes a step towards Frank, the loud sound of stone grating on stone fills the small chamber.

Frank turns and stares, mouth agape, at the rock monstrosity towering before him. He takes notice of the twigs and patches of fungus that cover parts of its bulk like sporadic patches of hair. Condensation runs in tiny rivulets from what appears to be its head to its feet as if it is a leaky dyke. Frank is reminded of *The Thing*, one of the superheroes that comprise the *Fantastic Four*.

The thing takes another lumbering step towards him, and stretches out its rudimentary arms. All the while, a low groan emanates from deep within the entity, resembling the sound one might expect an unhappy grizzly bear to make.

As Frank stands enthralled before it, he doesn't see the spider-like insect descending from a thick, silken thread behind him. It lowers its body, about the size of a regulation-style NBA basketball, to a stop just to the rear of Frank's head. It is black with red markings, and coarse, gray hair coats its entire form. Instead of four appendages

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protruding from either side, a dozen or more crab-like legs sprout across it's entire surface. Two large, dripping fangs make up most of it's feline-featured face.

It hisses, and while Frank is in the process of turning around to uncover the source of the noise, it sinks it's fangs into his exposed shoulder blade. As with Tolkien's Shelob, the venom sends Frank into a state of complete paralysis in a matter of seconds. A brief moment thereafter, when the venom coursing through his bloodstream reaches his brain, he loses consciousness and falls backwards into the rock monster's outstretched limbs.

The spider creature begins to ascending the thread spindling from it's asshole as the giant, with Frank's 300 pound catatonic body hanging limply in it's arms, begins to climb the staircase that runs along the wall, circling upwards. The rotten wooden boards are inexplicably able to accommodate their massively combined weight.

Within moments, the two creatures and their captive have made their way up to the underworld above.

The uppermost chamber of the lighthouse is a horror show. When Frank opens his eyes he is greeted with the grimmest of Grimm's Fairy Tale images. The circular room is filled with creatures and monsters of every sort. He sees giants and trolls, vicious looking dwarves and demonic animals. There is a Cyclops, a Tri-Clops, and an emaciated thing whose entire body seems to be comprised of eyeballs. A lone werewolf pants in the stuffy heat, it's long, pink tongue lolling from it's large, open jaw. A variety of species of alien insects scurries across the dirty floor or hang from the domed ceiling. They crawl over most of the bodies in the room. In some cases they crawl in and out of the open chest cavities of the dead ones. Multi-winged birds and bugs fly through the heavy, hazy air. A Gorgon stands across the room from where the werewolf has hunkered down, the beings around her, those with eyes, at least, all turned to stone. Pale skinned, fanged vampires lovingly stroke the shoulders of a number of skinny Goth teenagers who all share the vacant, lifeless

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expressions of the actual zombies in the room. Lizard-like creatures with green, glistening scales slink and slither about, some upright on two feet and others on their bellies. They mingle with the crowd, especially those with predominantly reptilian features. Distant cousins, perhaps?

Even amongst all of these supernatural beings, the sight that most astonishes Frank is that of himself, standing a few feet ahead. This version is blindfolded and has its hands tied behind its back by a sentient, snake-like rope. The rope continuously retracts and constricts, loosening and tightening its hold on its captive as if bored. Frank looks down at his own hands and is glad to see he has a corporeal form of his own. The Frank before him, like Sam in the movie theater earlier that day, is periodically flickering in and out of reality, in a constant state of transparency.

In between the two Franks, one to the left and one to the right, are two normal looking human beings in their early to mid-twenties. One is a beautiful woman, the other a very handsome man.

They both stare, like everyone else in the room, towards the center where the large, bright light to warn ships off the coast would normally rest in its mechanized rotor. Only the light and its carriage are gone. In its place is a large, ornate throne, the back facing the crowd. The seat is constructed of bones, skin, muscle and meat. Thick, sturdy bones, human or otherwise, form the chair's four legs. They are perched upon four grotesque, definitely inhuman, skulls. The armrests are actually two severed limbs, the hands and wrists at the ends still resplendent in the gold rings and silver bracelets of the previous owners. The cushion is the skin of some unfortunate, furry creature; torn open and emptied of all its insides, and then folded neatly like a ghastly blanket.

Standing next to the throne is the rock monster that carried Frank up from the chamber below. When it is sure that it has everyone and everything's attention, it raises its powerful arms and slowly swivels the chair around until the occupant is facing the congregation.



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Perched on the throne like a Queen is a beautiful, however horrific, 6 foot tall and perfectly proportioned woman. Her skin is gray and mostly exposed, only some areas obscured by dangling jewelry and bits of ragged bandages as if she is some half-wrapped mummy. Tribal tattoos of obvious significance adorn her slender arms and legs. The most terrifying, yet entrancing, aspect of her beauty is the empty sockets where her eyes should be. The sightless cavities are caves of total, impenetrable darkness. Like Lady Justice with her scales, she is truly blind. Yet Frank rightly suspects that very little gets past her. She stands, and when she speaks she has a soothing, yet commanding, voice. The room, which was in a calamitous uproar before, instantly quiets. She moves with a regal grace as she retakes her unholy seat.

“We are now ready to pass judgment on the accused. But first, William Matheson, son of John and Sarah Matheson, we will deliver our sentence. For escaping our judgment and previous sentence of purgatory, you will now be summarily cast off into the oblivion. We will deliberate on the fate of your accomplice before that sentence is carried out.”

Frank is confused. He rarely curses his sub-par intelligence. He's often happy enough just being himself, but this is one of those rare times he wishes he wasn't so damn slow. Although the blind woman he sees as being the Queen is addressing Billy, he has a sinking feeling that the accomplice she refers to is none other than himself. He is positive that this is a legal proceeding of some sort; only instead of Billy being on trial, he is the one who stands accused. Accused of what, he cannot tell. In the face of such ignorance, he is completely unable to form any kind of defense.

“You stand here before us, Frank Kranitz, son of Ronald and Dolores Kranitz, charged with knowingly aiding and abetting the guilty party.” The Queen says. “Will anyone here speak on your behalf?”

The man in front of and to Frank's right takes a step back to stand beside him.

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“I do.” The man says, raising his hand. The room erupts in a series of guttural catcalls that he chooses to ignore. “I will speak for the accused.”

“It is your right.” The Queen says, following the respected order of things. “What say you?”

“Frank Kranitz does not deserve the punishment most often dealt to perpetrators of the same heinous act. At the time of the Sha-Nock, when William’s Katch-Ka was displaced to the ninth ring and Frank’s was coming forth, he had no idea of the deeds William’s was guilty of on this plane. William had one chance to avoid the purgatory he had been sent to endure and he took it, piggybacking on Frank’s Katch-Ka when it appeared. Frank’s felt a soul in trouble and helped. No deal was struck. All Frank is guilty of is an act of kindness. He is the most innocent person who has ever stood before you in this court, your majesty. He deserves your mercy.”

“Why do you speak for him so?” The Queen asks the makeshift public defender.

“Because he is worthy of it. Even with the evil of William’s Katch-Ka inside him, and the evil of all those around him, he lived well and morally upright. He was never corrupted, whereas most others would have succumbed.” Here, the man stops, turns to Frank and smiles. “And he was nice to me. He spoke to me with kindness. He did not look upon my former state with horror. He felt pity for my plight. He cared.”

“Sam?” Frank asks in a hushed whisper, screwing up his face in surprised confusion. “Is that you?”

“Hi, Frank.” Sam says, offering his now existent hand for Frank to shake. “I told you one day when I was grown up I’d try to help.”

“Grown up? How? You’re dead.”

“I know.” He replies, chuckling. “One of the perks of the afterlife, I suppose.”

“I’m glad for you.” Frank says.

“I know. That’s why I speak for you.”

“The evidence you present is circumstantial at best and biased at worst.” The Queen says. “You have all but

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admitted so just now. Why should he not be made to suffer the same oblivion as the guilty?"

"See for yourself, your majesty." Sam says, stepping aside. "Please."

"I will allow for that." The Queen replies.

She steps before Frank and reaches out her hand. He stiffens, temporarily afraid, but quickly relaxes. Something about the Queen and her regal demeanor calms him. She places the tips of her six long, thin fingers on his chest. She tilts her head back, and if she had eyelids to close, Frank is sure she would be doing so now. As she reaches out with her mind's eye, trying to touch his soul, she appears to be in a trancelike state. Frank can feel warmth springing from her touch and spreading throughout his entire body. It instills him with a sense of peace and a feeling of hopefulness. It's only when she pulls her hand away that he realizes the feelings weren't moving from her to him but the other way around.

The Queen, her hand now back at her side, looks from Frank's blue and brown eyes to Sam's hazel ones.

"I agree with your assessment of this man, Samuel Thomas, son of Harry and Patricia Thomas. You have spoken well. I find Frank Kranitz not guilty of the crime he is accused of. But, as you know, the evil Katch-Ka has intrinsically been entwined to this body since birth and can no longer be separated to spare him. What would you have me do?"

"I leave that decision up to you and your infinite wisdom, your majesty." Sam says.

"Again, you speak well." The Queen replies, smiling coyly. "Then so it shall be."

She turns from the two of them and makes her way back to the throne. Reseated, she focuses her attention on the blond who stands just before Frank and to his left.

"Sally Renfield, daughter of Jack and Anne Renfield, Samuel has fulfilled the positive side of this equation. It is now your obligation to maintain the balance and deliver the negative."

"I understand, your majesty." Sally says. "I will carry out my duty with extreme prejudice. And pleasure."

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“What’s going to happen now?” Frank asks Sam, looking away for only a brief second as Sally approaches his doppelganger. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“The proceedings are coming to an end, Frank.” Sam answers, also keeping his focus on the scene unfolding before them. “William Matheson will finally get what he deserves for the blood he has spilled. Unfortunately, he and your body are one and the same now. But you, your essence, will get what you have always deserved – a second chance. You’re very lucky. It is a verdict not often given out. You truly are special. Live well, Frank Kranitz. And goodbye.”

Frank looks down at his hands again and what he sees silences any further questioning. He is slowly starting to fade away while the other version of Frank correspondingly begins to fill in. Sally walks towards the Billy him, and gently caressing his cheek, leans forward and places a soft kiss on his lips. She pulls her head back an inch and gently exhales a cloud of purple dust from her lungs into his.

She steps away and Frank’s body immediately begins to react violently to the foreign substance released into it’s system. It starts to convulse, and after a few moments of erratic jerks and spasms, expand. It starts at the neck before spreading to the rest of the body, the skin bulging outward as a bullfrog’s does. The clothes, tight to begin with on Frank’s massive frame, stretch to the limit and begin to tear and rip at the seams. Scraps of cloth eventually fall away from the bulbous form and lie in tatters at feet now resembling overripe eggplants. The torso expands at a greater rate than the lower extremities and the body soon collapses under the new mass. The snake-like creature that has been binding the wrists now uncoils and slithers away, darting behind a malevolent Djinn’s hoofed feet.

As the horrid display rages on before his eyes, the real Frank continues to disappear. Even though it is his own body that is being destroyed, he cannot turn away. He has no doubt that by the time the gruesome show is over, he will disappear into whatever the Queen has planned for

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him. As he fades away into nothingness, it appears as if his eyesight will be the last thing to go. He will be able to witness Billy's destruction with crystal-clear clarity.

The body that once housed both Frank and Billy's Katch-Kas is now little more than a gelatinous blob on the floor. The rudimentary shape of a human being can still be discerned in the copious amount of skin and fat, but only barely. The blindfold snaps free from a head now five times its normal size, the eyes as big as baseballs. A fat, dripping tongue hangs out of a salivating hole that was once a mouth. The thing struggles, and is finally able to raise what were once its hands to its face. At the sight of the two sacs that now look like overblown latex surgical gloves, it gurgles a final cry of anguish.

It is all over a second later. The thing explodes in a geyser of gore, while whatever is left of Frank Kranitz winks out of existence.

"It looks as if city council is finally getting off their ass and doing something about that old lighthouse. They've scheduled it to be demolished next month. 'Bout damn time, some kid was bound to get killed playing out there."

"What did you say, honey?" Kate Waters-Murphy asks her husband in a groggy, exhausted voice.

"What's that?" Ryan asks in return. "Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself."

He puts down the morning newspaper and gets up from the chair in the corner of the small hospital room at Our Lady of Constant Hope and Mercy. Under normal circumstances, the chair would have been extremely uncomfortable. After having spent the last 36 hours on his feet at his wife's side, however, it's a Godsend. He doesn't begrudge her her spot on the bed, though. After all, she's the one who had to go through labor.

He can't believe how, after all she's been through, she still looks so beautiful. Flushed, exhausted, her hair in complete disarray, she still manages to radiate a glow that renders her more attractive than he's ever seen her. Maybe

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all husbands feel this way towards the woman who has just given them the greatest imaginable gift – in this case a beautiful baby boy.

He leans over and kisses her on the forehead. Smiling together, they turn to face the small child asleep against his mother's chest. His eyes are closed now, but beneath the fluttering lids Ryan knows there is one gorgeous blue eye and one that is a gorgeous brown. The Doctor told him they would most likely change and become uniform over time, but Ryan secretly hopes they won't.

Ryan believes they make his boy special.

**THE END**

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## **Tale #7**

### **AntZ**

The moment the General laid eyes on the thing he went mad.

Sergeant Davis, who had seen his fair share of shit overseas, only barely retained his sanity in the face of the insane. Having been stationed at the TOP SECRET military complex in the Nevada desert since the end of the war in Iraq, he had seen some strange things, but none as strange or as horrifying as this.

After serving several tours of duty in Afghanistan, in places such as Kabul and Qandahar, he had been redeployed along with the rest of the men from his regiment directly to Iraq. He found himself caught in several intense firefights in Baghdad, Takrit and most recently Fallujah. He took an insurgent's bullet in the left shoulder in Takrit but it was the suicide bombing in the last city that left him too injured to finish his tour in the arid desert. Two months after he was air lifted to a coalition hospital in Jordan, he was on a carrier jet back to the United States. By the time he received his new posting at the Nevada base, the war in Iraq was over. The following conflicts in Iran and North Korea were both short lived. He wished he could have been there with his fellow troops from the 501st division, but the wounds he had suffered in that shit-hole country of Iraq guaranteed him that while the few remaining skirmishes overseas were winding down, he would have to remain stateside.

At the very least, Sergeant Davis took solace in knowing his current post developed and tested the new weapon that had terrorists and despots like the Iranian President and North Korean leader surrendering like flies. It was some new kind of device, both bio and nuclear in design, and it's devastating capability was enormous. It was classified to the highest authority, and all he really knew about it, until now, at least, was that they called it Compound Z. Although many liberals and pundits condemned its use without really knowing what it even



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was (you can't wipe out tens of thousands of A-rabs without raising a few eyebrows), the end result was that thousands of American troops' lives had been saved. As far as Sergeant Davis was concerned, anything that got an American soldier out of harms way could only be a good thing.

At least, that was what he had thought. Now it seemed as if American soldiers AND civilians were in harms way. Shit, everyone was on the menu. If they couldn't stop the outbreak here, where they prayed to God it had begun and remained contained, the soldiers still overseas would be counting themselves among the lucky ones. The weapons like the ones he now faced, or so he was informed, were all neutralized over there once the unconditional surrenders were finalized. Any threats of further insurgencies were quickly squashed by the promise that we still had a couple more back home and weren't afraid to use them. They were ready to be deployed the minute those locals got out of hand.

Well, they were deployed, all right. Right in our fucking backyard.

Sergeant Davis retained his sanity as the General, caught in the giant ant's mandibles, lost his. He was raised 20 feet in the air and sliced in half. This ant, resembling your average variety garden ant, only much, much larger, was about 14 feet in length. Of the other hundred or so that swarmed the base, some were as big as 20 or 25 feet.

As Sergeant Davis dashed to the radio to call in another air strike, the static was suddenly replaced with the frantic, panicked voices of a dozen different army men in a dozen different cities across the country. As he strained to make out their words through both the poor reception, gunfire and grenade blasts going off all around him, he suddenly realized why his superior officer, the recently bisected General, had lost it. It wasn't the sight of the gigantic insects before him. It was with the sudden realization that even though these new bio-nuclear weapons had been developed here, they hadn't remained on the base. After successful testing, they had been shipped overseas to combat zones in the Middle East and

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coalition bases all over Europe. They had gone through ports and cities all across the United States of America. Shit happened. Things mutated.

And babies were born.

The General didn't need to hear the screaming voices on the radio to know the things they had created here had not been contained.

"...Repeat, this is coming in from San Francisco... a squid about the size of the Chrysler building is attacking the Golden Gate bridge..."

"...Earthworms the length of Chinese bullet trains are making their way towards the heart of Washington..."

"...Giant cockroaches, I repeat, giant cockroaches are destroying New York City..."

As the voices on the radio began to overlap, rendering all of them indecipherable, Sergeant Davis morosely lay down his gun and turned to face the giant ant that had just crashed through their hastily erected fallback perimeter, designated Defence Line 267. As the ant's strong mandibles wrapped around his waist and lifted him high into the air, its stinger pierced the flesh of his shoulder and sent lethal doses of formic acid coursing through his system.

But before Sergeant Davis died, he couldn't help but wonder one last thing - when had the world gotten so Goddamn small?

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# The Benefits of Smoking

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*For Jack Finney and Kevin McCarthy*

### 1

Benjamin Tramer sat in the living room of his small, one bedroom apartment waiting for the pot of coffee in the kitchen to finish brewing. It was Halloween night, or more accurately the morning after, and the digital clock on his VCR read just past one in the morning. On the screen of his 27-inch television set, the third creature feature in an all-night marathon to celebrate the occasion was drawing to a close, the black and white image of James Arness as the Thing being set afire interrupted yet again by a BREAKING NEWS segment from the local ABC affiliate. Ben stood up and left the room, the news having actually broken just before midnight and already seeming less breaking than it was repetitive. The reporter simply repeated the same limited amount of facts and speculations that he had been voicing every 15 minutes for the past hour and a half.

In the cluttered kitchen, Ben retrieved the mug with the least amount of grime on it from the mountain of dishes erupting from the small sink. He moved a couple of plates and bowls to create a space between the faucet and the remainder to be able to blast the mug with a stream of hot water to make it somewhat more usable. The coffee pot was only half-full, and trying to minimize the amount of spillage, he carefully coordinated his movements to pull it out with his right hand while quickly placing the mug back in its place with his left. He was, for the most part, successful, and only a small amount spilled onto the circular burner beneath, where it sizzled and bubbled and created a new brown stain to go with the others that were already there. Going from cup back to pot proved more difficult as he didn't want to spill any of the hot liquid from the mug onto his hand. Some still did, and cursing loudly at the empty room, he set the mug down and gingerly wiped the coffee from the back of his hand against the seat of his pants.

Breathing cool air onto the very minor wound, he looked about the room and wondered how he could have

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let it get so messy. He was usually much more fastidious than the current state of his surroundings would seem to suggest. He assumed he must not have had the time to clean as of late, even though no matter how hard he tried he couldn't quite think of where that time went or how it had otherwise been occupied. He knew he had gone out tonight to O'Malley's after work with Deborah and Donnie, he could still taste the cheap beer in his mouth, but the disaster zone he stared at now had been accumulating for at least a week or more.

The small radio on top of the fridge, usually tuned to WKIT, the classic rock station, was now set to the local all news frequency, which of course was reporting on the same late breaking story as their counterparts on television. He lived in a small town and this was big, big news. Ben wouldn't be surprised if they were still talking about it come Christmas.

"Hello everyone, I'm Laurie Hill. To repeat, for those of you just tuning in, three bodies were discovered earlier tonight on Hawthorn Street in the Orange Grove section of the city." Ms. Hill said, her voice issuing from the small speakers of the inexpensive box. She tried to sound somber and respectful, but the level of her excitement still came through. Usually relegated to boring traffic reports and local bake sale announcements, this story must have been a wet dream come true. "Police are not releasing the names of the victims at this time, pending notification of the next of kin. However, it appears as if all three were a family who just moved into the neighborhood a little over a month ago. The authorities haven't been more forthcoming with any further details, but rest assured we will bring you any and all relevant information the moment it becomes available to us here at the newsroom. One thing we can say for certain is that a crime this heinous is sure to rock the stability of our very peaceful, closely-knit community to the very core. And to be clear, this is not a hoax. It is not a childish Halloween prank gone too far. Some of you might recall how Orson Wells' 1938 radiobroadcast of the classic *The War of the Worlds* was perpetrated on the eve of Halloween, causing a

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nationwide panic, but rest assured we are reporting only the facts here at KAB 1340, as horrible and far-fetched as they may seem to our quaint and quiet town. To repeat, three bodies have been....”

Ben chuckled to himself, wondering if Laurie had been watching the same movie marathon he was before starting her 11 o'clock timeslot. According to the TV Guide, *The War of the Worlds* had kicked off the evening, followed by *Them!* (another flick with Arness, proving there was more to remember him for than just *Gunsmoke*), then *The Thing From Another World* and now, as Ben made his way back into the living room and looked at the TV, Don Seigle's original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. He had been late tuning in to the marathon, but hadn't changed the station since arriving home at least two hours ago. Had he actually stayed at O'Malley's that long? He couldn't quite remember and decided that the danger of cheap brew wasn't in its taste, but in how much one could afford to ingest. He set his mug down on the coffee table between the TV and the couch, next to an overflowing ashtray and a near empty bottle of aspirin. Leaning back, he popped two more pills into his mouth and washed them down with caffeine. He pulled a cigarette from the equally near empty pack and lit it up. Closing his eyes as Kevin McCarthy and Dana Wynter drove through the sunny California streets on the television screen, he couldn't help but think that the coffee and smokes were providing better relief than the over-the-counter medication was. They seemed to be the only cure for his splitting headache. He took a long drag off of the cigarette resting precariously between his yellow-stained index and middle finger, and exhaled the smoke slowly, almost reverently.

Ben had been a smoker since he was 13-years old and now, going on 32, had spent much more of his life addicted to the drug than not. He only had vague recollections of not being a smoker, and most of those involved playing with *Transformers* and *G. I. Joe* toys as a boy. He had tried to quit more times than he could count, and each and every attempt was met with failure. If he were being honest with himself, it was always a happy

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failure. He had tried the nicotine gum, the patch, cold turkey, candy, everything. Each time he never lasted more than a few hours; always finding some excuse or other to start back up.

There was really only one reason why he even started. Even though a lot of the heroes in movies and on TV did it, that wasn't the cause; although for a lot of people it seemed to be a point of great contention. He'd have no problems letting his kids, if he ever had any, watch *It's A Wonderful Life*, even though the saintly Jimmy Stewart lit up a time or two. No, Ben started for the same reason most everyone else did – to look cool. Some of his friends smoked, and almost all of the older, tougher kids at his school did. It didn't take long to go from smoking for appearances sake to just for the sake of smoking itself. The head rushes became less and less frequent and the taste less and less bitter. He couldn't remember the last time it even made him cough. He actually inhaled, unlike a lot of the other kids in his social circle, and by the time they got older and decided to spend their money on other, more lasting things, it was easier for them to quit. People often thought it was peer pressure that drove him and his friends to pick up the habit in the first place, and maybe to a degree it was, but as time passed and the stigma attached to smoking became greater than other, worse addictions, it often turned out to be the opposite - it was actually peer pressure that made most of them quit.

But Ben stood his ground, tightly holding on to his addiction even though it was becoming harder and harder to do. As the cost of a pack skyrocketed, the places where he could enjoy them seemed to correspondingly decrease. Soon he'd only be able to smoke in the comforts (or confines) of his own home. He'd even been hearing stories lately about a number of apartment complexes banning the use of the substance anywhere on or in their property, too. It was as if he was smoking crystal meth instead of tobacco.

So Ben flirted with the idea of giving it up, almost more for show than anything else. He often thought he should take up other things just to quit *them*, and keep the



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one vice he loved. At least then he could feign making progress. But there was always one excuse or another to keep going. He'd quit when exams were over. He'd quit when he graduated. When he got used to his new job. When he got a new job that had no previous associations with smoking. After his birthday. After New Year's Eve. He'd think about how much he loved having that smoke right before bed on a cool, crisp autumn night. Or how well it went with that steaming hot cup of morning joe on a blisteringly cold winter morn. Or going for a walk on a beautiful spring day or a glorious summer evening. With each season came the promise that *next* season would be the right time. But like they say about tomorrows, they never quite get here.

It came as no surprise that his commitment to quit was always at its peak when he was finishing that last, special one. But once it was butted out, the clock didn't begin to tally how long he was a non-smoker, but to count down the time until he caved and had *just one more*. The longer he went, the more he was able to justify having that one, saying to himself if he was smoking near a pack a day before, having one or two a day now wouldn't hurt. He'd keep to that one or two a day for about a day or two tops, then half a pack and then back to a full one by the end of the week. And believe it or not, no matter how many times he had tried to give it up, he was sincere each and every time he told himself that he'd have just one more. Or two.

The closest he ever came to quitting was, of course, for a woman.

He had met Deborah Driscoll on his first day of work at the downtown branch of the First National Bank. She had been working there for more than a year and was appointed the task of showing him the ropes. He was smitten with her at first sight. It didn't take long for him to find out that she was an ardent anti-smoker, and for her in turn to discover his penchant for the act, but they still managed to get together. It started with a coffee, then a movie, then dinner and a movie, and before long they found themselves in a serious relationship, even going so far as to move in together. During their courtship, she

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turned a blind eye to the few times he would smoke and he was just as guilty of misrepresenting himself by smoking far less than he normally would around her. As time passed, however, and their true natures came out, they were at odds with each other more times than they came together. Ben would promise to quit, claiming he was cutting down and therefore would eventually be smoke-free, and she'd lie in return, saying as long as he didn't do it around her they would be okay. He hid packs in their apartment and she hid the fact, from Ben and herself, that she was starting to resent him and his habit. His resentment grew as well, as living with her was starting to make him feel like he was a teenager again, back at home with his parents when he first started smoking and had to keep it a dirty, dark secret to avoid being grounded.

Although they had tried to ignore the fact, their relationship was doomed from the very start. They eventually broke up, Deborah claiming she wasn't ready for a long-term relationship. But they both knew the truth. Ben went along with her ruse because it was easier to believe her lie than face the fact that he was losing the potential love of his life in favor of that other, apparently stronger, love which came before her.

Thinking of Deborah made Ben think of work and how, as the clock on the VCR now read past 2 in the morning, he'd be exhausted for his shift later that same day. He contemplated getting a few hours of sleep but decided, at the moment, against it. He'd feel worse on four hours than if he just stayed awake. He took a sip of his coffee, now cooled to the point of disgusting, and set it aside. On the screen, comical, oversized pods were being loaded onto the back of a farmer's truck. It was as if the *Jolly Green Giant* was sending out his minions to take over the world. Ben lit another cigarette as the news reporter with the bad toupee and too-white set of teeth interrupted the movie on TV yet again.

"As you can see behind me, the police are now removing the bodies from the crime scene."

On the screen, the reporter stepped aside to allow his cameraman an unobstructed view of the front door as

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paramedics and police wheeled out three gurneys. On them were two adult and one child sized black, rubber body bags. The camera pulled back to reveal an already large crowd of gawkers gathered even at this late, or early, hour, watching as the bodies were loaded into the backs of waiting ambulances. The vehicles drove off with dome lights flashing but no sirens wailing, the time for those long past.

Ben looked out the window to his right and saw the red and white lights revolving against the overcast sky. Hawthorn Street was only two blocks over. He wondered why he never thought of the proximity of the crime before, or why it didn't bother him now that he did. Confused, he looked to his left, towards the small porch, and saw his muddy boots on the floor, not recalling when he had worn them out and why they were now so filthy.

"As you can see," The reporter continued. "The bodies will more than likely be taken to the local morgue where an autopsy will be performed to discover the actual causes of death. But, according to some spectators here on the scene, there isn't much left of the bodies to work with. People here are saying these poor souls were dispatched in such a gruesome manner as to be more akin with a horror movie than real life."

Ben had stopped listening to the reporter and focused his attention on the house still in the background of the shot. He hadn't noticed it before because the egotistical newsman had demanded nothing but close-ups of his face until now. But now that the structure was visible, Ben was taken aback by the fact that he not only knew the house, but had also been inside it on numerous occasions. It was the old Warner place. They were a couple he knew very well, often being invited over to enjoy their hospitality. They had moved to San Francisco a little over a month ago, Ben joking it was because they were too cheap to have the mold in their cellar removed. They claimed they had family in the big city, and after they had gone their place had been purchased by....

As hard as he tried, Ben couldn't quite put a name to the new tenants who now occupied the familiar

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domicile. Or until recently occupied it. This inability confused because he knew that somehow he had met them previously as well.

Standing, hoping that movement would jar loose the memory and relieve him of the headache that straining to recall it was causing to worsen, he walked over to the porch and took another look at the dirty boots sitting on the tiled floor. Something at the periphery of his vision caught his eye, and turning to see it, he noticed several red stains on the cuffs of his fall coat. Removing the garment from the peg on the wall, he made his way back to couch to inspect it further.

Although he had no explanation for the appearance of them, he had no doubt that the stains were in fact blood. And judging by their current sticky consistency, it was freshly spilled blood at that. Ben quickly looked himself over, searching for a wound that he knew could explain this grisly discovery but that he wouldn't be able to find. When he saw that he was indeed unscathed, the headache pressing viciously at his temples seemed to triple. He reached across the coffee table, not for the bottle of aspirin, but the package of cigarettes. He was dismayed to find there was only one left. Going back to the coat, he began rummaging through the pockets, looking for a wayward pack. He found none, but did locate an unfamiliar piece of scrap paper. Written on it in a scrawl that wasn't his were two words:

Tranquility Motel.

Ben studied the mysterious note for another second before retuning it to the breast pocket where it came from. Although he hadn't thought it possible, his headache was actually getting worse. He'd have to deal with these confusing and cryptic discoveries later. Although he had decided against it previously, he now chose to get some sleep after all. It would hopefully help his head. Plus, he only had one cigarette left and the idea of watching inept infomercials for the next four hours without their companionship was too much to bear. He finished the smoke he had and was glad to feel the headache subside somewhat. He'd get up early in the

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morning and stop by Jack's on his way to work and grab another pack. That thought helped ease his mind a bit, even while other, much more disturbing, thoughts kept him somewhat ill at ease.

Could he have killed the family over on Hawthorn Street and have no memory of doing it? But, if he didn't kill them, why did he feel like that would be worse?

Eventually, he drifted off into sleep. On the TV screen, Kevin McCarthy was warning us that they were here already. And we're next.

### 2

Ben had every intention of waking up early and making it into work on time. However, having fallen asleep on the couch in the living room, nowhere near the digital alarm clock on the nightstand next to his bed, he didn't awake until early afternoon, just past 12. Rubbing his neck, sore from sleeping in an awkward position on a couch that was too short for his size, it took him a moment to realize just how late for work he was. Even under such horrible sleeping arrangements, he probably could have continued to slumber for another couple of hours, but a bright shaft of sunlight had made its way through the window to shine directly on his face. His fluttering eyelids couldn't offer enough protection against its intensity, and after a moment or two he had grudgingly got up. Looking about the room, two things instantly caught his eye – the first was that, by the brightness of the space around him, it was painfully obvious he had overslept and was very late for work. The second was the light on the answering machine next to his phone was flashing like crazy. He vaguely recalled turning the ringer off a few nights ago after being inundated by a number of annoying calls from telemarketers, all wanting his business, be it either for cable, phone, credit cards or newspaper delivery. He had forgotten to turn it back on which, if he had, would have provided a makeshift alarm. Smokers weren't the evildoers. Telemarketers were.

With his head feeling twice its size and weight, being late for a job he never really cared for in the first place was the least of his concerns. He got up from the

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couch, slowly shuffled into the kitchen and went straight for the coffee maker. The unit had automatically shut off hours ago. Not having the time to wait for another pot to brew, Ben simply took a mug from the sink, filled it up and nuked it in the microwave. Two minutes later, he was back on the couch, sipping the hot liquid, rummaging through the ashtray for a decent butt. He may have forgotten to turn the ringer back on for the phone, but the knowledge that he was out of cigarettes never slipped his mind.

Finding one about  $\frac{3}{4}$  its normal size, he straightened it out, cleaned the ashes from the filter and popped it into his mouth. He lit it, inhaled and exhaled, eyes closed. The look of serenity that crossed his features resembled that of a person taking a hit off of their inhaler to relieve an asthma attack. The first drag subdued the pounding in his head, and Ben felt ready to begin the day. The first task was to check his messages, although he had a pretty good idea who they'd most likely be from.

The first one, however, took him by surprise.

BEEP. "Ben? Hi, it's me, Deb. Look, I know it's late, but I just wanted to make sure you got home all right. You were acting very strange tonight. Call me on my cell, okay? Bye."

Ben took another long haul off of the smoke, and the tobacco within being so old and dry, the rest of it incinerated at once. When had Deborah called? Not right after he left the pub, that's for sure. She'd know it'd take him at least 20 minutes to walk home, no matter how drunk he was. She probably waited a good hour before placing the call, making him wonder why he hadn't bothered answering it. He then remembered the telemarketers and shutting off the ringer and chalked it up to that. Because if he hadn't come straight home, where had he gone? Memories of the dirty boots, bloody coat and bizarre note in his pocket came back to him and he couldn't help but wonder again if he had something to do with the murders on Hawthorn Street. The lack of any memories for a specific space of time last night worried him, but the lack of any motivation for committing murder kept him from going to the police. He might not know

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what he did, but he was pretty sure it hadn't involved a violent killing spree.

As he rooted through the ashtray again, the messages continued to play on the machine. The second was the familiar voice he had been originally expecting. It was Mr. Kaufman, his boss at the bank.

BEEP. "Look, Ben, I know you went out with some of the others last night for a little drinky-poo, but that doesn't mean your ass isn't supposed to be here on time. You're 15 minutes late as of... now. The clock is ticking, my friend. I better not have to call back."

Ben, having found another adequate butt, lit it, and continued to listen as the calls from his employer kept coming.

BEEP. "Thirty minutes. What are ya trying to do to me, Ben? It's the first of the month. You know how busy we get, what with all these bums cashing their free checks from the government. Unless you want to start becoming a recipient of those checks yourself, you'll be walking through these doors before I hang up this phone."

BEEP. "Jesus Christ. Why couldn't you have a cell phone like most normal people do? You can even put it on the company account. They got nice ones now. Won't cause a brain tumor, I promise. Let me tall ya something, Tramer. Your ass better be dead like those poor bastards' over on Hawthorn. It's the only excuse that'll keep me from firing your worthless butt if I don't hear from you by noon."

END OF MESSAGES.

Ben crushed the meager cigarette back in the ashtray and stood up. There were none left to salvage. It was already a quarter after 12, past Kaufman's deadline, so he saw no need to rush into work. He needed smokes and a fresh cup of coffee. He'd hit up Jack's on his way, as he had originally planned when he thought he'd arise at a decent enough hour. It'd take him 5 minutes to walk there, and another 15 to get to the bank thereafter. Since he didn't own a car, he made sure to find a job within walking distance. If he lost the gig at the Bank, he was sure something else would come along soon enough. The funds

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in his account were too sparse to allow him to be unemployed for any great length of time, but as long as he had a few leads he'd be able to talk his landlady into giving him an extension on the rent. It wouldn't be the first time. The month of November was already paid for, and if he was worried about money for any reason it was for smokes, not that.

Walking to the porch, Ben slipped on his dirty boots, and after choosing a less incriminating coat than the one with the bloodstains, stepped out the front door. Seconds later, his answering machine picked up without warning, the ringer forgotten about once again. Ben's pre-recorded message broke the silence of the empty apartment.

"Hi, you've reached Benjamin Tramer. I'm not home right now to take your call, please leave me a message at the sound of the beep and I'll get back to you."

BEEP. "I got a message for ya, Tramer." It was Kaufman. "You're fired!"

The weather was unseasonably warm for the first of November. Ben counted his blessings, since the coat he was now forced to wear was designed more for the spring than fall. He was also lucky to discover, in a pocket of thin fabric, a pair of dark sunglasses. He put them on and the reduction in brightness helped to alleviate the headache that had been plaguing him for the past several hours. Alleviate wasn't quite the right word, as the migraine banging the sides of his skull apart didn't actually get better with the addition of the sunglasses, it just ceased to get worse. Ben felt like going faster, desperately wanting the coffee and cigarette, the only two things that seemed to help with his suffering, but kept his pace to a leisurely stroll. Not to enjoy the weather, but because the simple act of walking was enough to intensify the throbbing in his temples, the veins seeming to reverberate like a tuning fork with each step.

The world outside his door was as messy as his kitchen, born from harmless children's shenanigans the night before, not inexplicable neglect. The street was



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covered with smashed pumpkins, the sticky orange seeds and innards covering the sidewalks and asphalt streets. Candy wrappers and empty potato chip bags clogged the gutters, dried egg yolk plastered many walls and cars, windows were soaped over, and every other tree was strewn with toilet paper, making them look like giant make-shift mummies. Ben smiled to himself, remembering his own Halloweens from years past and how, next to Christmas, they were always the greatest day of the year. They were definitely the most fun, but fun could never compete with presents.

He made his way to the end of his street, turned left and walked two blocks down Main, unimaginatively called that because it ran the entire length of Hardin County. He reached where it intersected with Hawthorn Street and stopped. On the corner was Jack's small convenience store, and if there was a more happening spot in town right then, Ben couldn't think of where it could be. It appeared as if half of the town was out in full force, people no doubt making the grim pilgrimage to see the crime scene everyone was talking about. For the people of Hardin Country, the murder house on Hawthorn Street was now tantamount to Graceland or Neverland Ranch. Ben wouldn't be surprised if somewhere amongst the many pools of people there was an unscrupulous person or two selling hastily made, disrespectful t-shirts with less than witty slogans like 'I Survived the Hawthorn Triple Homicide and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt' printed on them.

Ben couldn't care less, quickly making his way to Jack's with more, literally pressing, concerns on his mind. Upon entering the small building located just below Jack's even smaller apartment one floor above, Ben realized that the only person in town reaping the rewards of the crime more than the sycophantic news people was Old Jack. His place was full of patrons. Ben couldn't help but notice that almost every item he could see had a brand new, bright red price sticker on it. Recalling what most of these items had cost the last time he was there just two days ago, and

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knowing how greedy Jack was, he wasn't surprised to find that they had all doubled since then.

Jack, a grizzled old man with thinning hair, yellowed teeth and skin like leather, didn't greet Ben with his usual 'G'mornin' Ben, what's the good word today?' as the chimes over the front door announced his arrival. The place was a zoo, and even if the hunched over shopkeeper had been able to hear their metallic clinking, he was too engrossed in a heated discussion with two obese women outraged over the price of a cup of coffee to make his usual salutations anyway.

"I pay 75 cents for a cup of coffee twice this size over at McCormick's, sir, and you're trying to tell me that this costs a dollar fifty here?" The woman spoke the word 'sir' with such venomous sarcasm that a lesser, or kinder man than Jack would have crumpled under its power.

"Buck fifty a piece, Madame." Jack said, the moniker equally laced, as he indicated the two cups on the dirty countertop. "This here'll run ya three in total."

"Why that's highway robbery! At McCormick's...."

"Listen, lady," Jack said, disposing his previously false pleasantries. "If a couple a folks get bumped off near McCormick's, he can charge whatever he wants. This is my side a' town and I charge what I want, ya see? Three bucks."

The woman, much to her displeasure, opened a purse almost as oversized as she was and handed Jack three wrinkled bills.

"There'll be no tip for you, sir."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jack said, waving the woman aside. "Go on, git. Ya want a tip from me? Mind yer own business from now on."

The two portly women left the store, muttering obscenities, and Jack continued serving customers. Ben poured coffee into a large Styrofoam cup, glancing at the newspaper on the rack next to the machine. THREE FOUND DEAD, the headline screamed, as if anyone in town could possibly be left who didn't already know. He didn't bother reading any of the article, figuring by the

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time it went to press the journalists behind it had no further information than the people on the TV or radio. Probably even less, the printing world just too slow nowadays, unable to adapt to the changing world around it.

Seeing that the line had started to thin out, he made his way across the store and retrieved his wallet to pay for his purchases.

“G’morning, Ben, what’s the good word?”

“Morning, Jack. I take it business is good?”

“Booming, my friend. I bet I could sell ice cubes to Eskimos today. I bet McCormick’s place is emptier n’ a frequent sperm donors’ nut sack.”

“Looks like you’ve decided to open up a Starbucks. Am I going to have to take out a loan to pay for my coffee?”

“Heh, heh, heh,” Jack replied, leaning on the counter, taking the momentary lull in customers to have a conversation with his friend. “Don’ worry, still only 50 cents for my regulars. Like always. Buck fifty for those good for nothing lookie-lous coming from all over town to gawk at the old Foster place up yonder. I tell ya, it’s been so busy this morning, it’s starting to give me one helluva headache.”

“Maybe you should have taken the day off to go and see your doctor.”

“No way, sonny. Too much money to be made today. But funny thing, I was gonna go see old Doc King the other day before all of this hoopla, but it turns out he ain’t at the hospital no more anyways.”

“Oh yeah? Where’s he practicing now?”

“Nowhere. Apparently he got mauled by his own dog. Fucking thing bit his hands off, if ya can imagine that!”

“No shit?”

“Well, who really knows? Who really cares? This Foster fuckaroo is a Goddamn cash cow, and I ain’t gonna be closing today, headache or no headache.”

The Foster’s, Ben thought. Their name was Foster. Stan and Anne Foster. They used to laugh at how

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their names rhymed. Always joked about how they should have named their daughter Fran instead of settling on Alice. And now they were dead. And although snippets of memories of them were starting to return to Ben at the mention of their surname, he was still no closer to understanding how he knew them at all. It was almost as if the memories weren't simply forgotten, but erased entirely from his consciousness.

"Ya know what I just don't get?" Jack said, interrupting Ben's fruitless line of thought. "Old people. Now, I know I'm old, but I'm talking about *really old* people. Little Miss Maberry, for example. She came in this morning to get her paper and tea, and as always, paid for it with exact change. Took five minutes for her to rummage through her purse to find the nickels and pennies she needed. So tell me this - if she always buys shit with exact change, how the hell is she getting new change? It's a mind puzzler, that's for sure."

"Speaking of mysteries," Ben said, ignoring the tirade about Miss Maberry and her monetary practices. "What have you heard about what happened up the street?"

"Them getting killed is great for business." Jack continued, a more subdued note to his voice than Ben could ever remember hearing before. "But I tell ya, it's a crazy shame how those folks got cut up. 'Specially the little one."

"How do you know what happened?"

"People been talkin' 'bout it all day long, coming in n' out, overhearin' the cops n' reporters. According to them, it was an awful mess they found. Anonymous tip sent them to check out the place. What they discovered made two cops sick. All three had their heads torn right off. Not cut off, ya hear me, but torn off. As if someone or something just ripped 'em right off'n their necks. But that ain't all, even though it's more n' enough. Apparently, the killer then placed the heads on the mantle above the fireplace, setting 'em up just right to stare down at the bodies on the floor. Only they couldn't really stare, see, 'cause them heads were hollowed right out. No signs of the

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brains or eyeballs at all, so I hear. And the bodies? Well, killer went and lined ‘em up, the little one in the middle, holding her parents’ dead, clammy hands like they was skipping through the park. And not a drop of blood left in ‘em, either. What do they call that? Exsanguinations? Whatever, they was bone dry. And if ya can believe that, the cops think it musta been rats! Rats, fer crying out loud! Not the murders, of course, but the missing blood. All because there were a bunch of little bloody tracks all over the place. Shee-it. I’d like ta see the rat that could bleed three humans dry, even if one of ‘em was a kid. Those would be pretty freakin’ large rats, don’t ya think? But I got the whole thing figured out. I know what killed them folks. Not who, ya see. What.”

“Enlighten me.” Ben said, impatiently taking a sip of his coffee. He usually enjoyed Jack’s lunatic rants, they were much more frequent than one might expect, but today all he wanted was to get his smokes and go. He’d chain-smoke the pack if he had to, anything to vanquish the agony in his head.

“Zombie vampires.” Jack said, so matter of factly that Ben couldn’t tell if the old man was serious or not. “Think about it. Explains both the missing brains *and* the missing blood.”

“You’re in the wrong line of work, my friend. You should have been a detective.”

“Naw, the pay sucks.”

If there was one thing Jack loved more than weaving crazy conspiracy yarns, it was money.

“Well, speaking of your line of work,” Ben said, trying to conceal the impatience that was starting to creep into his voice. “How about you sell me a pack of smokes and this coffee here.”

“I thought you were quitting.” Jack said, turning to the large wall display housing numerous brands and flavors, grabbing a pack of Ben’s preferred brand without needing him to indicate which. “I seem to recall you talking ‘bout quitting last time you were here.”

“I talk about quitting a lot.” Ben said, paying for his items with his debit card. “I think about it every time I

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come in here and see all those smoking cessation items up there right next to the cigarettes. Kinda hypocritical, don't ya think? Maybe you should just sell one or the other, eh?"

"Son, I sell diapers *and* condoms, too. Whatever will make me a buck. Lookit yours truly, here. I've been smoke-free for 5 years now. If I can do it, so can you."

Ben knew instinctively that Jack quit smoking simply because of his one other, greater love – money. If packs cost the same amount today as they did in Jack's youth, Ben had no doubt the old man would close up shop and join him outside for a puff right now.

"Well, maybe some day I'll join the masses, but not today." Ben said.

"And don't forget about cancer, my friend. That's something ya don't want to have to ever experience."

Ben was growing more and more exasperated. Why did people who were trying to convince him to quit always bring up cancer as if he was unaware of that potential threat? The warnings they printed on packages were the biggest waste of time he had ever seen. Who buys smokes, reads the warning sticker and thinks, 'Holy shit, I didn't know these things were bad for me! No thank you!' and return them to the store? Ben would worry about some malignant growth inside of him later. Until then, he just needed his fix.

"I'll take that into consideration." He said, removing the cellophane wrapper. It was a contradiction that Jack failed to notice, feeling good about himself that his words of warning weren't falling on deaf ears. There were no worse people when it came to preaching the virtues of non-smoking than ex-smokers.

Before the shopkeeper could continue his preachy sermon, the chimes above the door to his store jangled noisily as a group of kids from the nearby university barged in.

"Holy crap, I can't believe what's going on down the street! It's so cool!" The leader of the pack exclaimed. He was a jock wearing a coat emblazoned with his fraternity's – Sigma Phi Omega's - Greek letters. His eyes were as wide as saucers, and like the rest of his friends, he

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seemed to be operating on excitement overload. “Hey, pops, ya got any coffee in here or what?”

“I just brewed a new pot.” Jack said, the scent of an easy mark making him forget all about his conversation with Ben.

“Yeah? How much?”

“I’ll tell ya what, kid. I’ll make ya a deal.” Jack answered, smiling his yellow-toothed shyster grin. “Two bucks a cup.”

Ben took the opportunity to slip out of the store undetected. Once outside, he placed the sunglasses back on his face and popped the blessed cigarette he had been craving into his mouth. Momentarily setting his coffee aside, he lit it and breathed a sigh of relief. He could instantaneously begin to feel the pain in his head start to subside.

Picking the Styrofoam cup up from off of the ground, he momentarily contemplated joining the sea of people that were moving like steady waves toward the Foster house. In the end he decided against it. Not because he was concerned about how he was already so late for work, but because he had been there before. And not just when the Warner’s resided there, either.

Although he couldn’t recall when, he feared it was much more recently than that.

### 3

Ben walked through the front doors of the First National Bank shortly after 1 p.m. Either Mr. Kaufman had been exaggerating in his message, a trait common to his conversational style, or it really had been busy that morning. Now that the lunch hour had passed, however, the number of clients had tapered off drastically. Ben spied Deborah as he made his way across the spacious room. He noticed the look of concern in her eyes as she watched his progress from behind her teller’s counter. Even looking as nervous as she did, she was still beautiful. Gorgeous eyes, lustrous hair, perfect skin and a figure to be proud of. She didn’t smoke, but Ben knew many girls who did simply to keep a figure like hers. Being an appetite suppressant, he

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could never quite figure out fat people who smoked as well. Usually it was a case of either light up or chow down. As far as he was concerned, if you were going to smoke, at least be *thin* about it.

Before he could approach her, Mr. Kaufman stormed out of his office, and with a pointed finger, yelled out his name. He must have been keeping an eye out for him to know the exact minute he walked in. And he must have been really pissed to break the normally calm demeanor he always wore while in view of the customers.

“Tramer! My office! Now!”

Ben looked back at Deborah, shrugging his shoulders at Kaufman’s outburst, trying to make light of the whole situation. The look of concern for him in her eyes intensified. Ben walked through a small gate and past the room where Donnie worked alone, making large change orders and providing deposit slips and receipts for the surrounding businesses. Ever since Kaufman had emerged shouting from his office, everyone except Donnie was staring at Ben. His best friend at the bank refused to make eye contact. Something was definitely up, and Ben had a sneaking suspicion it went well beyond his being late for work.

In Kaufman’s office, the door closed behind him, Ben took the seat in front of the boss’ large, oak desk. On it was a picture of the man’s family, a blotter with his name and title of Branch Manager printed on it, a desk calendar with new a sudoku puzzle for each day and an expensive computer. Oh, and a half empty bottle of Scotch. The public display of frustration and anger, coupled with drinking on the job, let Ben know that his boss was extremely agitated about something. And knowing that his boss rarely cared for anyone but himself, the worry wasn’t for Ben, but over something that could have serious repercussions for himself.

“You wanna tell me just what the hell is going on, Tramer?”

Ben shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t care if he lost the job; it was never anything more than just a paycheck to him anyways. In fact, Ben had never had a



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job that fulfilled him in any way, shape or form other than monetarily. For him, work was nothing but legalized prostitution, selling his time instead of his body, only for a greatly reduced rate than those on the street corner got for theirs. The government with its taxes was his pimp, just not as sharp a dresser as the professionals in the big city. But even with nothing of value to lose, he still squirmed under the scrutiny of Kaufman's glower, the same way a person would feel guilty whenever a cop is around even if they did nothing wrong.

"I'm sorry, sir. I've been having a really bad headache lately and I fell asleep on my couch, nowhere near my alarm clock. I overslept and...."

"That's not at all what I'm talking about." Mr. Kaufman said curtly, cutting Ben off in mid-ramble. "I'm talking about this stuff with the Foster's."

Ben was confused. It was always hard for him to take Kaufman seriously. The man looked just like J. Jonah Jameson, Peter Parker's boss at the Daily Bugle, in the old *Spiderman* cartoon from the 60s. Minus the cigar, of course. Mr. Kaufman didn't smoke. But at the mention of the murdered family's name, and Ben's continued inability to grasp how they fit into his life, he was starting to take Kaufman very seriously for the first time ever.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean." Ben said, the size of the understatement making him feel like a giant liar with something dastardly to hide.

"Bullshit, you don't." Mr. Kaufman said, unscrewing the cap on the bottle of Scotch and pouring himself a shot. He didn't offer any to Ben. "You don't show up for work on time this morning, and you don't call to tell me why you're going to be late. You know how I run my ship, Tramer. That means your ass is out the door. So, as I'm preparing your termination papers, I decided to check over some of your work history, you know, to find some discrepancies to justify letting you go in case you went to some bleeding heart Liberal group of pussies and claimed unfair treatment or something like that. And do you know what I found?"

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It wasn't a rhetorical question. Mr. Kaufman wanted an answer. And after a minute of silence, Ben finally complied.

"No, sir."

"I found that the recently deceased Foster's, upon arriving in our town, decided to open accounts at our branch. And who do you think opened those accounts for them, hunh?"

"Me?" Ben said, not waiting this time.

Listening to Mr. Kaufman's history lesson, scraps of memories were starting to come back to him. The Foster's came in about a month ago, transferred their accounts over from their branch in Portland, and opened a new savings account for their 7-year old daughter, hoping to teach her the importance of fiscal responsibility at a young age.

"With the way the economy has been going, every little bit helps." Stan had said at the time.

Ben had wholeheartedly agreed, not because he actually cared, but because it seemed like the bankerly thing to do. Now, in Kaufman's office, replaying the scene in his mind, he knew it must be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. There had to be a connection between him and the Foster's that went beyond this brief encounter.

"Yes, you." Mr. Kaufman said. "And all the paperwork was handled, if not expertly, at least acceptably. And just when I thought I couldn't have you pegged for anything but tardiness, what do you think I found?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Money. A lot of it. A shitload, if I'm to use the technical term. In your bank account. One Hundred and Eighty-six thousand dollars and fifty-four cents, to be exact. Now, I know you don't have that kind of money. I sign your checks, remember? So, where do you think I thought you got it from?"

If Mr. Kaufman had waited for Ben to answer, they would have been there all day. Perhaps even longer. The last time he had looked, Ben had forty-two dollars in his checking account, and that was before using his debit card to pay for the coffee and pack of smokes that

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morning at Jack's. To find out that he was suddenly rich left him dumbstruck and tongue-tied.

"Fraud, of course." Mr. Kaufman continued, realizing that Ben wasn't going to answer him. "I assumed you had been embezzling funds somehow. I couldn't quite figure it out. No one who was smart enough to steal that much money without getting caught would be that fucking stupid to deposit it in their own account at the bank from which they stole it. But I never pegged you for a rocket scientist, so I kept looking. Turns out that, late last week, the Foster's transferred the bulk of their monies into your account. I dug up the paperwork, verified the signatures, and yes, on the surface everything seems to be legitimate. But I find it a little bit odd that, a week before they're killed, they pretty much gave you their life savings. And now, since this happened under *my* watch, you'd better start answering *my* questions, or so help me God the next ones you'll be answering will be for the police downtown."

"I... I can't explain it. I don't know what's going on."

"Not good enough. Try again." Kaufman said, beginning to rub his temples in frustration.

Before Ben could reiterate his ignorance, there was a knock at the door. Mr. Kaufman told whomever it was to go away, but Deborah, on the other side, ignored him and opened it anyways.

"Sir, I just wanted to let you know I'm going on my break now." She said, looking to Ben more than she looked at Kaufman.

"Jesus Christ, fine, go ahead. Can't you see I'm busy here?"

"Actually, sir," Ben said timidly, even going so far as to slightly raise his hand as if he were back in elementary school. "I really need to talk to Deb for a second. It's very important. Do you mind if I step out with her for just a moment?"

"Yes."

"It'll only be a moment, I promise." Ben said, already standing and exiting the room as if Mr. Kaufman had granted his request instead of denying it.

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They closed the door after them as they left, and Mr. Kaufman poured himself another shot of Scotch. And then another. He was pissed.

“Fuck it.” He said, picking up the phone and dialing a number. After a second, he spoke into the receiver. “Yes, I want to talk to whoever’s in charge of this Goddamn Foster fiasco.”

Outside, the first thing Ben wanted to do was light up a cigarette. The confrontation with Kaufman and all of its confusing elements had conspired to rejuvenate the headache that had previously been in a state of precarious remission. But he was with Deborah, and although they hadn’t been together for months, he still couldn’t easily bring himself to smoke around her. Old habits died hard, or so he heard. In his case, old habits hardly died. The irony was not lost on him. When they were together, especially towards the end of their relationship, it had gotten very hard to refrain, especially when they were watching a movie and one of the characters lit up, or while at work and break times would roll around. He would often take his lunch hour at a different time, claiming it would be better for their relationship if they did their best to keep their professional and personal lives separate. What he really meant was it was better for them because he could sneak a cigarette and try to mask the smell on his breath with gum, a deception that rarely worked but was equally not commented on by her. And today, even with everything that was going on, he still loathed to have one in front of her.

The sun was bright as the two of them made their way across the parking lot of the First National Bank, Deborah trying her best to shield her eyes from its glare while still keeping an eye on where she was going.

“Damn this weather.” Deb said through clenched teeth. “I drank too much last and have too much of a hangover this morning to deal with so much sun. Isn’t it supposed to be November? Where’s fall when I need it?”

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“What’s going on, Deborah?” Ben asked as they came to a community picnic table that workers from around the area used on their breaks.

“I was hoping you could tell me.” She said, removing her hand from her brow, the table located in the shade of a giant Elm tree. “You were acting so strange last night. And now there’s all of this stuff with Kaufman. I’m worried about you.”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Do you remember anything about last night? Do you remember going to O’Malley’s after work?”

A patchwork of memories scrolled through Ben’s mind. He vaguely remembered leaving the bank and someone driving to the pub where they often went on Fridays for drinks. The place was pretty packed, many of the customers and servers wearing Halloween costumes. The usual St. Patrick’s Day decorations, kept up all year long to give the Irish impression even though the owner was Jewish, had changed – cardboard shamrocks and leprechauns were replaced with witches and skeletons. People often used to joke that owning an Irish pub while being Jewish must make the owner a cheap drunk, leaving Ben to think there must be a Golem somewhere being fed pieces of paper inscribed with many a racist’s name. They had taken a seat near the back, ordered some pitchers and...

“Only snippets. Bits and pieces, here and there. It’s like I was blacking out off and on all night long. There are pieces missing from even before we started drinking. The harder I try to remember them, the worse my headache gets.”

“I’m not surprised you have a headache. Both Donnie and I do, too. We all drank quite a bit.” Deb said.

“No, it’s not that. This is different. What actually happened last night?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.” Deb began to explain. As she told him what transpired, images in Ben’s mind came to the forefront to accompany her words. “We got off at five like usual, and Donnie suggested we hit up O’Malley’s to celebrate Halloween. You know Donnie; he

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can find an excuse to celebrate anything. Veteran's Day, laundry day, the twelfth of the month. We all thought it would be a good idea, and you offered to drive. Which was kind of weird because I didn't know you had gotten a car, but I didn't think too much of it. We haven't been exactly as close as we used to be, have we?"

"No, we haven't." Ben said distantly, trying to figure out this latest mystery of a newly acquired automobile.

"Anyway, everything seemed fine. Same as always. We were having a few drinks, having a few laughs, but then you got really sullen. Stopped participating in the conversation altogether and just sort of... stared off into space or something. When Donnie started talking about hooking up with two Swedish flight attendants last summer, you kept your mouth shut. You know every other word out of his mouth is horseshit, but you still stick up for him all the time, never letting me poke holes in all of his make believe sexcapade stories. But last night you didn't come to his rescue at all. You just got up before he even finished telling it, leaving without saying a word. He was shocked, and quite frankly so was I. You were kinda being a rude jerk. Is any of this ringing a bell?"

"No, I'm sorry, it isn't." Ben said, more confused now than ever. "And I'm sorry if I was an asshole last night. I don't remember any of this."

"Apology accepted." Deb said, lightly touching his shoulder. "But we were never really mad at you. Just concerned. I followed you into the parking lot, expecting to find you out there having a smoke. Instead, you were fumbling with your car keys, trying to get them into the lock, but your hands wouldn't stop shaking. I took your keys and held your hands in mine and they were so cold. I had to ask you what was wrong a couple of times before you would even acknowledge my presence. It was like you were sleepwalking or something, and had to wake up first. When you did, your voice was slurred and incoherent and I knew then not to let you drive. I took your keys and tried to get you to come back inside for a cup of coffee, but you just kept mumbling about having something important to

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do. I asked if you forgot something back at work, and you said no, you had important things to do... elsewhere. That's exactly how you said it, too. With this long, dramatic pause. It was creepy."

"Jesus," Ben said. "I don't remember any of that."

"Well, it worried me enough that I gave you a call a little while after to make sure you got home okay. I gave you an hour, figuring even you could have stumbled home in that time. I would have gone with you, but Donnie was still inside, and you know...."

"I know." Ben said.

Ever since they had broken up, the two of them had tried to keep their distance from one another. Like probing at a loose tooth with an inquisitive tongue, they had reconciled a few times since their separation, and the pain caused from the eventual dissolution of those reunions always outweighed the momentary, familiar joy they originally brought.

"Anyway, here are your keys." Deb said, handing the foreign object over to Ben. "So, what the hell was all that with Kaufman? It couldn't have just been because you were late."

"No, it's worse. But like last night, I have no idea what's..." Ben trailed off in mid-sentence as he watched three police cars quickly pull into the parking lot. The uniformed officers inside jumped out, and dashed into the bank as if someone had decided to hold the place up while Ben and Deborah had been sitting outside.

"Are they here for you?" Deborah asked.

"I think so." Ben replied, almost in awe of the situation.

"Then I think you'd better go. And fast. I'll cover for you."

"But maybe I should...."

"You need to figure out what's going on before they accuse you of something you may or may not have done. You're not going to be able to do that in their custody. Now hurry up. Go!"

Ben jumped up from the picnic table, and giving Deborah a quick kiss because it seemed like the

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Hollywood thing to do, fled. If everyone was starting to think he killed the Foster family on Hawthorn Street, he needed to figure out if he did, why.

And there was no better place to start looking than the scene of the crime.

### 4

Only, as Ben was to soon find out, the scene of the crime was completely inaccessible. The number of people still thronging Hawthorn Street hadn't diminished as the day progressed. The police presence, made up of a forensic team that was called in special from out of state, and a number of rookie and reserve officers for crowd control, made accessing the old Warner place, Stan and Ann Foster's final place, impossible.

Ben pulled the car to a stop a few yards away, near a driveway that the owner was renting out for 50 bucks at intervals of 15 minutes. The owner, a retiree using this opportunity to add to his meager pension, spotted Ben's idling car and got up out of his lawn chair, waving his arms to get his attention. Ben ignored him and did a three-point turn until he was heading back up Hawthorn.

He had discovered the car, a new model Ford, in the parking lot of O'Malley's pub. Even with the mid-afternoon patronage being as slow as it was, there were still a number of vehicles in the lot to choose from. He pressed the automatic alarm button on the key chain Deb gave him to signal which one was, for lack of a better term, his. The alarm momentarily squawked and squealed as it was deactivated, and Ben climbed in after unlocking the driver's side door. Checking the glove compartment for the ownership papers, he wasn't surprised in the least to find the vehicle registered to Anne Marie Foster. The loaded pistol he discovered underneath the papers took him somewhat aback, however. But today was all about rolling with the punches, so he stuck the key in the ignition, revved the engine and headed towards Hawthorn Street, keeping his eye out as best he could for passing patrol cars without looking suspicious.



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Rolling the car to a stop at the end of Hawthorn, investigating the crime scene a wash, Ben was momentarily at a loss on how to proceed. Looking out the window at Jack's convenience store, he was surprised to find a large CLOSED sign on the door. With so many people still around to line Jack's pockets, Ben figured the old man had to have died to shut down so early. But dead men don't hang closed signs in their windows, so Ben didn't give it another thought. He had his own concerns to deal with.

The bleating of a police siren directly behind him interrupted them.

Heart racing, he glanced in his rearview mirror and saw the black and white directly behind the Ford. He almost got out of the car, arms raised in surrender, when he realized the cop was simply telling him to get a move on. Jack pulled past the stop sign, took a right onto Main, and started heading towards his house. The cruiser behind him followed, and although he was sure they weren't following *him*, he had a pretty good idea where they were looking for him nonetheless. The cop turned left onto his street while Ben kept heading straight. If the police were looking for him at the bank, he had little doubt that a detachment or two was currently staking out his apartment, searching it for evidence that he was the next Michael Myers or something worse. They wouldn't have gotten a warrant by now, but they definitely had just cause. Shit, even Ben was starting to wonder if he should turn himself in and plead absolute, total bat-shit insanity.

But he kept going, pulling into a gas station parking lot to rest a moment while his nerves calmed. Pulling the pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he lit one and tossed the pack onto the passenger seat next to him.

"Think, think, think." He mumbled to himself in between hauls.

Looking past the dirty windshield, he spied a telephone booth and inspiration struck. Stepping out, he left the car running should he be spotted and need to make a fast getaway. He almost laughed. When the hell did he become John Dillinger, on the lam from the law? He strolled to the booth and opened the phone book attached

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to a steel chain to deter theft. Flipping the pages frantically, he slowed down when he reached the "T" section, and began scanning for the Tranquility Motel. Locating it, he lightly traced the tip of his finger across the page, from the name to the address, and memorized it.

The note he had found in the breast pocket of his bloodstained coat may mean nothing, but for now it was all he had to go on. And a slim chance was better than no chance at all.

### 5

The Tranquility Motel was situated just off the highway leading into town, and Ben pulled into its muddy parking lot 20 minutes later. He shut off the engine, took a deep breath and made his way towards the small, unattached building just next to the larger, L-shaped one that housed all of the rooms for let. A sign on the window said VACANCY, and chimes similar to those at Jack's rang above his head as he stepped through the door.

Behind the check-in counter, a woman in her mid-50s smiled at him. Her hair was unnaturally bright orange and her lips a brighter red. The only things larger than the pearls of her necklace were the large, plastic hoops through her ears. When she smiled, Ben saw that her teeth were also stained red with lipstick. The nametag pinned to her ample bosom read 'Irene'.

"Hi ya, sugar." She said pleasantly. Then, realizing who had just walked in, followed with a less exuberant "Oh, you."

"Um, hi." Ben said, winging it. "I'd like to rent a room."

"A second one?" Irene asked, raising a penciled eyebrow in confusion.

"Pardon me?"

"You want ta rent a second room? Well, looks like ya got yerself a second car, too, so why not a second room to go with it. Money's money."

"I'm sorry, I don't follow you." Ben said, confused. It was becoming his all-too familiar state of mind today.

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“Whatsa mater wit ya? Ya hit yer head or somethin’?” She said scornfully. “Ya came in here last night, driving that silver Ford over yonder, and got a room. Now ya want another one. Did ya lose yer keys or something? It’ll cost ya twenty bucks to replace ‘em if ya did, ya know.”

Ben began checking the pockets of the pants he hadn’t bothered changing out of before falling asleep on the couch. He hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a slight bulge in the back left pocket. He dug out a single key attached to a small, brown leather key chain in the shape of a triangle. Printed on it in gold was the number ‘7’.

“There ya go.” Irene said, smiling sarcastically. “Ya still want that other room now or what?”

“No, thank you.” Ben said, inspecting the key in his hand that was as foreign to him as the set for the Ford. “This will do fine.”

“Well, good for you.”

“I must have had some night last night to forget about this, eh?” Ben said, chuckling nervously, trying to cover up the status quo of confusion.

“No shit, Sherlock.” Irene replied. “I had a couple of complaints concerning you last night. Weird hollerin’ and screamin’ coming from yer room. Was about to go and turn ya out when it stopped, tho. I run a decent place here, so if yer plannin’ on staying another night you best keep it down, buster.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” Ben said, absolutely ignorant about what had happened the first time. “And yes, I’d like to keep the room for an extra night.”

“Fair enough.”

Ben turned to leave, his hasty exit halted by the old woman’s clearing of her throat.

“Forgettin’ something again?”

“Excuse me?”

“That’ll be another seventeen for the room.” She said, her hand out, the many bracelets on her liver-spotted wrist clinking against each other. “Cash.”

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“Oh, of course, sorry.” Ben said, thankful to have bought the coffee and smokes earlier in the day with his debit card instead of the last 20-dollar bill in his wallet. If his banking transactions were being monitored, the usage of any of his cards would surely give him away. “Keep the change.”

As Ben left the office, Irene, secreting the money away in her large bra, mumbled to herself.

“Tourists.”

Ben crossed the parking lot to Room 7, and the silver Ford parked in front. Looking at the vehicle, he could almost see the registration papers in Stan Foster’s name in the glove compartment. He hesitantly tried to turn the knob on the room door and found it locked. Using the newly discovered key, he slipped it into the keyhole and was about to let himself in when he decided to stop. Leaving the key dangling from the doorknob, he went back to the car that he had arrived in and removed the pistol from the glove compartment. Switching the safety off, he slid the weapon into the waistband of his pants, wondering if he’d even know how to properly use the thing should the need arise. He figured he might, not knowing when he had learned how to switch the safety off even though he apparently had.

Armed but feeling only slightly more secure, he walked back to the building and cautiously entered Room 7. The lights were off and the heavy velour curtains pulled closed. He could barely make anything out in the darkness. He pulled the gun out of his pants with his right hand and held it up next to his head like the good guys did in the movies. With his left, he blindly searched out the light switch on the wall and flicked it on.

The overhead light was dull, but the wattage was enough to cast the room in an orange glow and allow Ben to see that no one was present. Well, no one alive, at least. On the far side of the room, crumpled on the soggy carpet and leaning up against a gore-streaked wall, were two viciously mauled bodies. They were both blue; the only blood left being the copious amount staining their

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immediate surroundings. And even though it seemed in excess, there wasn't enough to account for what had once been flowing through their veins. Like the Foster's before them, these two had been completely drained. There was a large, cardboard sign a few feet away from the corpses. It had fallen down face-up, and Ben could read the words printed on it with a fat black magic marker – 'Boston or Bust'. Below the words was a crudely drawn smiley face.

Ben began taking a step towards the victims when memory assaulted him almost as fiercely as the repeated headaches had been doing all day long. In his mind's eye, he saw them, alive and vibrant, smiling and laughing, on the side of the highway. The man held the sign while the woman raised her thumb. They were barely out of their teens. Ben pulled over. He never picked up hitchhikers, but last night he did. He picked them up because he had been ordered telepathically to do so by the three things he had placed in the trunk. They were hungry and needed to eat.

"Jesus Christ." Ben muttered under his breath.

"Jesus who?" A chorus of voices, all speaking in unison, replied behind him.

Ben turned and screamed. He fell backwards onto the couch, the gun in his hand momentarily forgotten. Standing before him were three things no sane mind could ever comprehend.

They had snuck up on him when he had been looking at the bodies. They had probably been hiding in the small, adjacent kitchenette, and their movement into the main room had been silent. There were three of them, standing in front of the relatively inexpensive television set bolted to a large table. As Ben stared at them, it took a few moments for his brain to process and puzzle out their bizarre, Picasso-like features.

The three creatures before him were of varying size, like the three bears that terrorized Goldilocks in the children's fairy tale. Their skin was a translucent, slimy gray, beneath which one could see thousands of bright red veins that formed their complex circulatory system. They were free of any hair or genitalia, but by their body shape

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and mass one could envision that the tallest was male, the thinnest female and the smallest their offspring. All three were severely gaunt and emaciated, looking like the concentration camp survivors the Allies had freed from Auschwitz. They had no thumbs, only 4 long fingers on webbed, amphibian-like hands. The digits were all of equal size, at least eight inches long apiece. There were no discernible prints on the tips, just small, almost invisible incisions in the gray skin.

Their heads were shaped like the rounded leather triangle of the motel room key-chain, resting on necks with gills on either side. Near the pointed tip at the top was a small mouth filled with jagged, broken teeth. The lips were smeared with dried blood, instantly reminding Ben of how kids, after drinking a glass of juice, would often get *Kool-Aid* mouth. Just below that orifice were two small slits that, since being in approximately the same place as on a normal human's face, Ben assumed were nostrils, although the true nature of their function was unknown to him. The things' eyes were located on the bottom corners that formed their triangular skulls, resembling the optics of a Hammerhead shark. The eyes themselves were not alien, but human, and that made them all the more horrific since they were so unnaturally positioned on such an unnatural visage. When the creatures spoke, it was in unison, all three individual voices forming to make a slightly echoing new one. They communicated telepathically, the mouths on their foreheads seeming to be for eating purposes only.

"He looks confused."

"He does."

"It is because of the smoking."

"It is."

Ben, still not over the shock of seeing these strange, alien things, was disoriented even further by their conversing with one another as separate beings, but with one unified voice. It was like the crazy person on the street who constantly talked to himself.

"The smoking retards the process."

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“It’s a shame the others chose him. He told them he was... cutting down. Apparently not. But did he help us, do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“We should ask him.”

“We should.”

“Well, did you?”

It took Ben a moment to realize that the three wretched things were now addressing him. He swallowed hard and somehow was able to form words in response to their question. It was not the answer they were hoping to hear. It wasn’t an answer at all.

“What the fuck are you?” Ben said, a very noticeable note of hysteria in his voice.

The three things turned to face each other again, as if forming a Little League softball team’s huddle.

“No, he still does not remember. This will not do. Not at all.”

“Perhaps we should... educate him.”

“Yes, perhaps we shall.”

The three creatures turned to face Ben once again, the thinnest of the triumvirate taking a few steps towards him. As ‘she’ drew closer, Ben could begin to make out the features that led him to view this one as feminine – rounded, swaying hips, a slight formation of breasts.

“Stay back!” Ben said, finally remembering the gun in his hand and raising it into something of a defensive posture. “Don’t come any closer!”

“Hush. This will take but a second.”

‘She’ raised her hand, palm outwards, towards Ben’s face, but his attention kept shifting back to the mouth on ‘her’ forehead. It had begun to drool, and a blistered tongue hungrily started licking the lips. The incisions on ‘her’ nondescript fingertips split open and four snake-like probes slithered out. A small suction cup was located at the end of each, and they quickly attached themselves to Ben’s head, one on each of his temples and two on his brow.

“Remember.” The monsters cooed.

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Ben was suddenly in the living room of the Foster's home. It was Halloween night, although no carved pumpkins were on display to mark the holiday. He watched the scene before him as if he was an astral projection. He saw himself sitting on the couch while Stan, Anne and Alice stood before him much like the creatures were standing before him at the motel now. The Ben in the flashback seemed to be in a zombie-like trance.

"The time has come." Stan said, pacing about the cozy room. "We should use Stan's car."

"Yes." Anne replied.

Then, as if she was the ringleader, Alice spoke in a voice far too mature for her seven years. She stepped forward and handed Ben a small piece of paper, which he placed in the breast pocket of his coat without bothering to glance at it.

"Yes, we will use Stan's car to get to the motel. Ben will have to take a taxi back into town. He will withdraw the money first thing tomorrow morning when the bank opens. They have been transferred into his account so there should be no problems. We have left him the gun, however, in case he does encounter anything. Then he will use Anne's car to join us back at the motel. He will be fully under our control by then, not this back and forth state of being the smoking has caused. We will use him to transport us to the rendezvous point with the others."

"I'm concerned." Anne said. "He should be more like us now. It only occurs in increments. I think he's smoking too much."

"I agree." Stan said.

"There is nothing we can do about that now. He still managed to secure the funds to facilitate our escape. And he spread the remaining spores as we told him to."

"Interesting that he chose the girl and his boss." Stan said. "One he loves and one he hates."

"And don't forget about the old shopkeeper." Anne replied.

"Ah, yes, him."



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“Enough.” Alice said authoritatively. “That will be inconsequential once the change occurs. Now, I’m feeling this host start to rot. It is time we left them. We need to feed.”

What happened next should have sent the Ben sitting on the couch running mad. But he simply watched, an indifferent look on his face.

Alice reached out and took her parents’ hands. All three sets of eyes in the Foster’s heads rolled back to whites as their bodies fell lifelessly to the floor with a thud. They convulsed only once before, with a crack and a sickening tearing sound, the skin at the temples and bases of their skulls split open. Four long stalks like spider legs slowly pushed past the shattered bone, tentatively inching their way outwards. The stalks, with clawed ends, dug into the carpet and began pulling the lighter heads away from the heavier bodies. The necks stretched amazingly long before tearing just inches above the collarbones, sprouting geysers of blood.

The decapitations complete, the heads, unsteady on their thin legs, skittered away from the corpses, leaving tiny, bloody tracks in their wake. Shaking, and with a wet, sucking sound, the eyeballs retracted inside the skulls. What was left of the shredded necks began to thicken and bulge outwards as what remained of the heads began to apparently give birth. The stalks protruding from the temples and the bases of the heads slid back into the skulls as well, while from the necks gray, meaty brains emerged. The stalks followed suit and eventually the things were free from the craniums that had previously encased them. The eyeballs, supported by thick, glistening veins, gave the brains with their spider-esque legs a very crab-like appearance.

All orbs turned to Ben and watched as, apparently bored by the horrifying transformation, he aimlessly picked up Stan’s head and peered through the empty eye sockets. Blood dripped from the object onto the cuffs of his coat, but he either failed to notice or didn’t care.

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“Kind of like a Jack-O-Lantern.” He said in a monotonous, emotionless voice. No doubt it was the same voice Deborah heard last night while confiscating his keys.

The three newly birthed creatures on the floor ignored him and moved towards the bodies. Unlike the exaggerated tales that would be told following the discovery of this mess, Ben did not place Stan’s severed head on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. He simply dropped it on the floor.

Long, green proboscises grew from the brains just below the eyes, and now looking more like grotesque mosquitoes, the things began to feed off of their corresponding bodies. Or at least each could have been dining off of their former selves; they all kind of looked the same now.

The bodies drained, the beings satiated, it was time to go. The brains, formerly stark gray in color, were now a bright crimson. Although it was almost imperceptible, they had also grown in size after feeding. The stalks were thicker, with the beginnings of elbow and knee-joints. A thin layer of skin was beginning to form as well. In time, and with a few more meals, Ben had no doubt the things would grow into much more humanoid forms.

“Come, we must go now.” The thing that might once have been Alice said telepathically, although it was hard to discern which one was speaking. It seemed as if they all were. And in the end, did it really matter? The three things moved across the carpet towards the tiled porch, the chitinous sounds of their clawed ‘feet’ filling the small space, leaving tiny, bloody tracks.

“We’ll need to stop for a bite to eat along the way. We’re famished.”

And then, just like that, Ben was back at the Tranquility Motel.

The hitchhikers were the bite to eat they had stopped for and they lay on the floor beside him while the creatures who ordered the meal stood before him. He sat on the couch, the gun in his hand, and tried as best as he

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could to come to terms with the situation. As hard as it was to believe, he was an errand boy for a trio of monsters. And if the jumpstarted memory he just experienced were to be believed, he would soon be under their control. In fact, he was already in the process of changing. He still had moments of quasi-lucidity, like when he phoned the police and anonymously told them to search the Foster home for the bodies, but they were few. Quasi, because it wasn't a part of *their* plan, but it was also something he had no memory of doing after it was done – a kind of in-between Ben. Most of his recent memory losses were moments when he was more *them* than him, however. When he transferred the money. When he drove them to the motel. When he infected the others. Jack. Kaufman. Deborah.

Oh God, Deborah. She didn't smoke. Despised it. As did Kaufman. And Jack had quit years ago. Jack, with the headache this morning he thought was borne of too many customers. Kaufman rubbing his temples as he tried to force answers from Ben. Deborah, mistaking her migraine for a mere hangover. He had infected them all. They were all going to be overtaken.

"See," The things said, reading his thoughts as easily as they spoke to him telepathically. "You have no reason to resist us."

"It is done."

"It cannot be undone."

"Now, we must plan our escape."

"No." Ben said, blinking his eyes rapidly, emerging from the fugue state that being sent back into his memories had caused. "No, I won't help you. I can't help you. I didn't get your money."

The things tilted their heads, and if they had had any, Ben was sure their brows would have been furrowed as they tried to figure out the validity of his statement. Continuing to pry into his mind, they came to the conclusion that he was telling the truth.

"This is unfortunate."

"But not insurmountable."

"It will simply make things more difficult."

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“But with your help, we can still make the rendezvous point. Others will bring the money. Perhaps the girl. Or maybe the boss. It really doesn’t matter which”

Ben looked at the things and wondered what they could possibly even need the money for. It wasn’t as if they were going to Wal-Mart to stock up on supplies. Ben couldn’t recall ever seeing an aisle with hapless hitchhiker meals-on-the-go.

“We need the money for you. For your kind. For the ones who will help us. You will still require shelter and sustenance. This will require money. It will take some time yet before we convert enough of your population for us to just be able to take what we need by force of numbers. Some time. But not a long time.”

“No.” Ben said, this time with more conviction in his voice. “I’m not going to help you. Why do you think I’d be willing to help... whatever the hell it is you are?”

“Because you have no choice.”

“Or soon won’t.”

“Yes, soon.”

“Not a fucking chance. I’ll blow my Goddamn brains out before I loose control of it to you.”

As if to lend credence to his statement, he turned the barrel of the pistol to his own temple.

“Please stop.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“We must hurry.”

“Fuck you.” Ben said, turning the gun from his own head to the ‘female’ still in front.

Ben’s head suddenly erupted in a series of sharp, agonizing pains. He felt himself losing control of his hand and swiveling the gun a few inches to the left so the creature was no longer in his line of fire. The pain ebbed away slowly as the things removed their psychic talons from his mind.

“We know that hurt.”

“We can make it hurt even more.”

“Or we can lessen your pain. If you do as we say.”

Ben was sweating profusely. He didn’t trust them.

“Trust us.”

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He felt his heart racing in his chest, each contraction sending a ripple of pain through his brain. His headache had reached critical mass. He needed a smoke. He remembered leaving them on the passenger seat of the car. His breathing quickened. His stomach muscles tightened and he doubled over.

“We can end your pain.”

He thought he was going to vomit. He felt his body starting to convulse.

“Just help us.”

Yes, he thought. Help them. Think about helping them. Help them get to where they need to go. Help them escape. Help them and they will help you.

“We will.”

Help them. Help them. Help them.

And the moment the three monsters believed Ben would do just that, they released the pressure they had been exerting over him. And he reacted *without* thought. Turning the gun, he fired without hesitation. Not at the thing closest to him, but at the smallest one. The offspring. The thing that had been Alice. The bullet smashed through the part of ‘her’ triangular face where the slits Ben thought of as nostrils were. Either by sheer luck or some unconscious part of him that was so close to them as to be aware of their physiology, he had shot ‘her’ directly in the spot where the brain resided. The entry wound was no larger than a nickel, but the back of ‘her’ head exploded in the size of a bowling ball. Brains and blood showered the wall behind ‘her’. As the thing fell to the floor, dead, it banged into the table behind it and the television turned on.

The other two were momentarily in shock. Ben had hoped that some human aspect of their former lives remained, and that the sight of seeing their daughter killed would be enough to buy him a second or two of time to recalibrate his attack. It did. As they were turning back to face him after regarding the gory site of their fallen comrade, he put two bullets into each of them. Even though he had never fired a gun before in his life, he could hardly miss in such close quarters.

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The other two joined the third on the floor and Ben felt no further mental intrusions from them. They were well and truly dead. On the television screen above them, the same reporter from before, now back in the WWAR newsroom and delivering an update during the commercial break of an afternoon soap, read from a teleprompter off camera.

“The three bodies from the grisly triple homicide on Hawthorn Street last night have been moved from the local county morgue to a special facility....”

Ben stood up and switched off the TV. His head was still killing him. Even though the things were dead, he was still becoming a thrall to their kind. The process was apparently irreversible. The headache was getting worse by the second. He hadn't much time. He had to make it to the car and the package of cigarettes he had foolishly left behind. If he could get to them and light one up it might buy him a couple more hours. It wouldn't take too long to do what needed to be done. He would kill them all and then turn the gun on himself. It was the only thing he could do. He'd shoot Jack. Kaufman. And God help him, Deb. Dying by his hand would be preferable to the fate that awaited them if he didn't act. The fate that awaited everyone if it continued to spread.

He prayed for the strength to do it. He remembered once praying to God to help him quit smoking when he knew it was going to cost him his relationship with the woman he loved. And now he was supposed to kill her? If he couldn't quit smoking, how could he ever...?

The thought of quitting smoking jarred his memory. The thing that shifted loose was scarier than seeing the creatures he had just disposed of had been. Scarier than the thought that he was becoming one of their slaves.

They had spoken of 'the others' choosing Ben. And that they have a rendezvous point. The others were no doubt the Warner's. They had been complaining for months about the mold they had discovered growing in their cellar but never got around to having removed. The

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mold of which they ceased to speak of entirely in the final weeks leading up to their move. The mold from which the spores that created these monsters came from. Mold that then infected the Fosters. Mold that produced spores which, when taken in small doses, rendered you powerless in mind and body to the creatures that were born from those subjected to larger quantities.

“Oh my God,” Ben said as understanding dawned on him. “They said they were moving to be closer to family. They took that stuff with them. They took most of it to San Francisco because they’re making a new family. That’s the rendezvous point. That’ll be ground zero.”

As the implication of the deduction became clear to him, the pain that pierced his brain became strong enough to force him to his knees. He collapsed to the floor and began crawling towards the door, the parking lot, the car and the cigarettes that would temporarily save him. Halfway there, he realized he wasn’t going to make it. He realized he wouldn’t be able to save Jack, Kaufman and Deb. Perhaps they had already succumbed. And with the Warner’s in San Fran already, there was no way he could stop all of them anyhow.

They were here already.

Thinking of all the people opting to buy the patch or the gum or any of the other quit-smoking aids made him laugh out loud. Those people thought they were bettering themselves when, in essence, they were only hastening their own doom.

Ben raised the gun to his head again, but dropped it before pulling the trigger. The pain was too intense. It was blinding him. He lost motor control. He lost control of his bladder and bowels. He lost consciousness.

And in the end, he lost himself.

# **THE END**

## Tale #8

‘ \_\_\_\_\_ ,

Ray set his alarm to go off at 5:45 am. The volume was set to full blast. He had been late for work again today, and according to Mr. Najim, if he didn't start showing up on time he'd be out on his ass. He set the alarm clock radio to the hard rock station, making sure to get the most bang for his high volume buck. He placed his faith in the screeching guitar work of Eddie Van Halen over the monotony of Enya and her *Oronoco Flow*. Either way, the radio was set to BE LOUD so it didn't really matter what kind of music started his day as long as it roused him from his slumber on time.

A fight with Mr. Najim had started that day off on the wrong foot, and by the time the little hand flicked past 4, he was more than ready to go home. His coat on and his computer off, he was out the door before the second hand hit 6. He crossed the office parking lot, went down the sidewalk and eventually made his way to the transit station where an already large number of cranky travellers were trying to make their way home.

Ray pulled out his ipod, stuck the two buds in his ears and turned it on. Or tried to. The 'dead battery' icon filled the screen. Nothing but the somewhat muted sounds of passing busses and mumbling passengers filled his ears.

*Fucking great*, he thought. *A perfect end to a perfect day.*

Preoccupied with pressing the power button a number of times, foolishly expecting a different result, he didn't look up when a large man approached and started talking to him.

"Gotta problem wit yer unit?" The man said. His voice was slow and somewhat slurred. Ray couldn't tell if he was drunk or retarded. Either way, he didn't want to talk to the big lunk.

Palming the ipod so the blank screen didn't give him away, he began to bob his head as if listening to something with a techno beat. When the large man made another inquiry, Ray went so far as to even start lip



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synching to non-existent lyrics, the direction of his gaze never falling on the man but just off to his right. If someone who could read lips were around, they would have thought him crazy, mouthing gibberish. If anyone knew it was a ploy to get out of acknowledging the stranger's existence, they would have known he was an asshole.

Regardless, the large man shrugged his shoulders and turned to talk to another, less anti-social traveler.

Ray's bus arrived a few minutes later, and he boarded it, heading for home. The first thing he did when he arrived was set the alarm clock.

He awoke the next day when the bright, late-morning sun fell upon his face. He opened his eyes, saw the digital alarm clock reading 9:47 am, and quickly jumped out of bed. Throwing his clothes on mere seconds after his feet touched the floor, he darted from the room. He quickly slipped into his boots and winter coat and fled from the scene of the crime. He was almost two hours late for work. Mr. Najim would have his balls for breakfast. Or lunch, seeing as he was late for breakfast, too. He had no time to waste, and barely wondered why he failed to hear his alarm clock go off, or come to think of it, the front door slamming shut behind him.

The three-block walk to the transit station near his house was a weird one. It was winter and he was aware that sounds were often muted this time of season, but today it seemed as if sound was actually non-existent. He failed to hear any birds chirping. There was no sound of snow crunching beneath his feet. There was no rumble of far-off traffic, which in reality wasn't that far off at all. He thought he caught a glimpse of a garbage truck two blocks over, but couldn't be sure if he heard or only imagined he heard the sound of its air-breaks hissing. The steady sound of the wind seemed to be coming more from within his head than without.

He shook off the odd feeling and made his way to the bus. The stop was sparsely populated after the morning

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rush hour crowd had come and gone, but there were a few travelers waiting nonetheless. He recognized the large man from yesterday and approached him, not bothering to stop and wonder what he was doing on this side of town and at this time of day.

“Excuse me, sir?” Ray asked, his voice sounding hollow and tinny in his own ears. “Did I miss the 101?”

“I think you missed a couple, friend.” The man answered, laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

The large man pointed over his shoulder, then pivoted to continue pointing as the number 101 bus that had been coming from behind drove past. The large vehicle didn’t make a single sound. There was no mistaking it this time. Ray was stone cold deaf. Yet, for some reason, he could hear the man standing before.

“What’s going on?” Ray screamed. Or at least he thought he screamed. “Why can’t I hear anything? How come I can only hear you?”

“What can I say?” The man said, shrugging his wide shoulders. “Life can be funny that way. Looks as if your ears have a dead battery, buddy.”

Laughing, he brushed past a very confused and terrified Ray. He quickly trotted across the street to the other side, where the busses headed East across the city instead of West.

“Wait, please don’t go!” Ray said, rushing after him. “Please, keep talking to me! I need to know....”

The driver of the idling bus held a cup of coffee in shaking hands. He spilled a good portion, but barely noticed the steam rising from his slightly scalded skin. The liquid on his hand reminded him of the blood that now coated the grill of his bus.

“I just... I just... I don’t know how it could have happened.” He stammered.

“Let’s go over it one more time.” The police officer that was taking his statement said with detached interest.

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“He must have been committing suicide, right?”  
The driver said. “He just stood there in front of my bus even though I was honking the horn like mad. They found an ipod on him, didn’t they? He wasn’t deaf if he listened to an ipod. It must have been suicide, right? Why else wouldn’t he have moved when I honked my horn? I mean, over and over, I just kept honking it.

And honking it.

And honking it.”

# The Open Door

## **The Present Then**

### *Kate's Story*

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Kate Patterson checked her email one last time, discovered no new messages and shut down the computer. The same went for voice mail. Most of the people who worked at the agency had already left and she was now free to flee as well. She took her time straightening up her desk, making sure there were no neglected post-it notes with some task or other that needed her immediate attention before leaving for the weekend. Everything looked good, and after quickly poking her head in Ms. McDonald's office to get the official all clear, she slung her purse over her shoulder, closed the door to the staffing agency behind her and left.

The warm summer air outside the downtown office building engulfed her the moment she stepped into it. She was sweating by the time she made her way to the subway entrance three blocks away. She descended the grimy stairs that lead to the terminal below ground and waited patiently for the train that would take her out of the city. Her commute to and from work was an hour and a half in each direction, and consisted of walking a total of seven blocks, taking the subway and then transferring to a more rural bus route. Or vice-versa, depending on whether she was coming or going.

She boarded the train when it arrived and took a seat. She figured, as she always did when getting on, that the car hadn't changed much in the last 30 years or so, the vinyl, orange-colored seats looking like they might have come straight out of the late 70s or early 1980s. Sometimes she would close her eyes and pretend she was a teenager, back in that decade of Ronald Regan and *The Cosby Show*, granted the wish for another chance to change all the wrong decisions she had made the first time around. But she would inevitably open her eyes and find herself back in the present, the more modern advertisements reminding her that the 1980s and her youth full of promise were long

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gone. There was no longer a rugged cowboy extolling the virtues of Marlboros, but an emaciated, balding chemotherapy patient reminding us all of the dangers of smoking. There were ads for the Internet and cell phones, technology that didn't exist for the masses back then. Movie placards for films like *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* were displayed instead of some fluffy John Hughes high school comedy starring Molly Ringwald. No, the 80s were gone, and with it Kate's dreams of a much different life than that of her present.

She tried to push such depressing thoughts from her mind, and for the most part, succeeded. She was leaving the city for another day, after all. The depressing memories flitting through her head could stay in the city where they had transpired. They were the reason she tolerated such a long commute for work; she couldn't stand to live in the same place where everything... happened. But she couldn't afford to be unemployed, either. She wasn't some foppish character in a Dickens story, able to live off of a grand inheritance. Plus, she actually didn't mind her job. She could tolerate spending three hours a day to get there and back, even in close confines with a multitude of nameless strangers who were also making their way from point A to B via public transit. After everything that had happened in her life, these were the only social interactions she could handle. She wasn't afraid of people, or at least she told herself she wasn't. She felt she had finally crawled out of the hellish abyss she had been trapped in for so long and was doing just fine, thank you very much. And if she wanted to spend the ride with a book instead of interacting with the people around her, that was her choice, not the sad result of the life she had lived. The same went for while at home, choosing the comfort of her own room, away from the prying eyes of the world around her, including those of Clare, her concerned roommate. It was her decision, and she tried to tell herself it was borne from a love of that kind of solitary lifestyle rather than a fear of a more social one.

Kate had always been introverted and shy. When she was younger, she hung out with a group of boys and

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was the least popular of the bunch. Regardless of which one she hung out with (and they were always worse when in a group, like hyenas), she knew she was the one that didn't belong. It was as if her life was that old *Sesame Street* bit where one thing was not like the others. She quickly learned her role in their particular hierarchy was that of follower, not leader. The less she rocked the boat, the less she fell under their scrutiny. She even carried around a spare chocolate bar at all times in case her stomach started rumbling from hunger pangs, alerting others of her existence. She became a 'yes girl' to a group of boys she didn't even actually like. She only hung out with them so as to not have to stay home on the weekend, a place where she was even more unhappy, living under the militaristic thumb of her father.

She had been hanging out with Mike, Porter and Vic since before puberty sent their hormones into overdrive. Even after that monumental change happened, she was still seen as just one of the guys. She remembered how, on one of their routine excursions about town, they found a number of small rooms built into the underside of the large hill upon which stood the giant screen for the local Drive-In. The rooms were a hangout for many of the older kids in town, filled with cigarette butts, empty beer cans and liquor bottles. Most importantly, to the boys at least, there were stacks and stacks of crinkled, mildewed porno magazines. They discovered the quasi-buried treasure in the middle of the afternoon, and with the older kids only arriving after dark, were able to steal a large pile to take back to their makeshift fort in the woods. They swore an oath of secrecy for fear that if any of the older boys discovered who was behind the theft of their nuddie mags, they would deliver them all a serious ass kicking. For the rest of the summer, all they did was hang out and look at them. Kate joined in everyday, regardless of the fact that she had no interest in spending her vacation looking at pictures of naked women.

The boy's interest in her only marginally increased when she started to develop breasts of her own. She made out with all of them at some point that summer, and was

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felt up by Porter, but never had sex with anyone. Not out of any self-respecting moral compass, but because none of them ever tried. That they viewed her so asexually was just another contributing factor to how unimportant she felt. The boys were more content with the girls in their stroke mags, and she, as always, was simply content to just go along with whatever they decided.

It came as no surprise that, growing up thinking and acting as she did, she'd end up with a guy like Tom.

*No, no, no, no*, she thought, wondering how he could crash into her thoughts yet again. He had been out of her life for almost eight years now, but the memory of the bastard steadfastly refused to remove its claws from her psyche.

She had met the younger Thomas Patterson during in her third year of college while he was in his first. By the time he dropped out in his second, they were engaged. Although she didn't love him, she wasn't altogether surprised. Kate wasn't a stunning beauty, but she wasn't a homely old maid, either. She was what most people are – average. And even though Tom came on hot and strong, telling her she was beautiful and smart (traits in which Kate would rank herself as average at best), it wasn't his generic, infantile wooing that won her hand. In the end, she hooked up with him because he had taken charge, and after growing up always following the herd, it was just her nature to go along with the new Alpha male. Thinking back on it now, she wanted to puke.

Tom didn't start hitting her until the third year of their marriage, but once he started it seemed he couldn't stop.

*And you will stop right now, Missy!* Kate mentally admonished herself. *You need to stop thinking about him and what he did to you. He can only keep hurting you if you let him.* Kate never once visited a therapist to deal with the years of systemic abuse she had suffered at his hands, but she did watch a lot of *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*. She figured that's what they, or any other paid professional, would say to her if she opened up about her past. As far as she knew, no one was ever aware of what transpired behind the walls of her and



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Tom's small house. She figured people knew they didn't have an idyllic life together, but they had no proof of how bad things actually were. She had no job or circle of friends that she needed to hide the bruises and cuts that often adorned her average features from. She rarely met with her or his relatives. And although she knew the therapists would tell her of the importance of not harboring such secrets, that they would slowly but surely eat away at her insides, she was glad they were hers and hers alone. She didn't want people to look at her and see *him*. She didn't want people to see what *he* was able to reduce her to. To see the power *he* had had over her.

*Dammit, that's enough!* Kate's mental voice screamed. If it could it would have administered a vicious psychic slap to the face as well. It was the voice that told her Tom *still* had power over her, and for the time being, was enough to banish him to the shadowy corners of her consciousness. As she once again pushed the memory of Tom Patterson from her mind, his last words to her, made all the more ominous as he was no more than a black silhouette standing at the top of the cellar stairs when he issued them, seemed to linger in her mind, echoing as if off the rocky walls of a large canyon.

"Lucky you live in a time where there's divorce to turn to, bitch. Lot less dead wives that way."

Kate shuddered. She felt her arms break out in gooseflesh and her heart started beating a bit too fast. She knew she was forever safe from Tom's clutches now, but the fear she felt was no less palpable for having that knowledge. It was like the person who walked away from a very bad car crash, but when thinking back on it, can't help but quake at the thought of what might have been.

Aware that these morbid thoughts would continue to plague her the entire way home if she didn't occupy her mind with something else, Kate unzipped her purse and pulled from it the book she was currently reading. She had gauged that morning that there were at least 50 pages left, so she didn't bring a backup. The length was more than enough to last until she reached her doorstep. Her social interaction came with the people and clients she worked

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with on a daily basis; her travel time was spent with her nose buried between the pages of a book. The knowledge of the people around her, if not actually interacting with them, was more than enough to let her know she was still alive. Dealing with coworkers and clients was much easier as it was a part of her job description and therefore no one could accuse her of overstepping her social boundaries by doing it.

She began reading and was dismayed to find that, after only a few pages, she came to the epilogue. Finishing that, she found the last 42 pages of the book was a long excerpt from the author's next work, available that upcoming fall in hardcover from the same publisher. Or, to be more accurate, several falls past as the book, like most of those that made up her library at home, was used.

*Shit*, Kate thought, closing the paperback and returning it to her purse. She hated having nothing to focus her attention on, not only out of fear that the unpleasant thoughts of her past would resurface, but because she was always overly concerned with where to look, afraid people would think she was staring at them. Such a thing could possibly lead to a volatile confrontation or, perhaps even worse, a conversation. If she had checked more closely that morning, she would have brought a second book, but Kate never looked ahead. In a way, she thought it was cheating herself out of the joy of a good story. If she knew how it ended, why bother reading it at all? Kate knew that the ending of a book could *change everything*, and she always withheld skipping to the last page, no matter how much she wanted to know how it concluded.

Just then, the prerecorded robotic voice cut through the static of the speaker system, announcing the last stop on the track. Kate's fears of not having a book to keep her occupied were postponed for the time being as she and the few remaining commuters began gathering up their stuff and making their way to the doors. Kate exited the train and made her own way through the small terminal and up the flight of stairs that led to the world above. She had a five-minute wait before her connecting bus arrived,

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so she looked around for anything to read. The newspaper dispensers were all out of the Friday edition and the one convenience store at the terminal had already closed for the weekend. She'd just have to suffer through the last leg of her ride home and hope for the best.

Her bus was six minutes late. When she finally boarded it, she discovered that, although only half-full, all of the window seats were taken. She had hoped to get one so she could stare absent-mindedly at the scenery scrolling past. She was now forced to either share a forward-facing seat with a stranger, or take one of the benches at the rear of the bus. She chose the bench because, even though she would have to face someone directly across the aisle, it was completely empty and she wouldn't be forced to come into physical contact, even if only shoulders and hips, with some anonymous rider.

She thought she could at least still watch the greenery pass by while staring above the head of the woman across the seat from her. She would just have to make damn sure not to give the impression that she was gawking. She found, however, that doing so made her nauseous. She could either stare at her shoes or look directly at the woman across the aisle from her. She chose the woman as her sorry shoes only reminded her of how poor she was. Plus, the woman had, as she wished she did, a book to bury *her* nose in. She was therefore even less aware of Kate's presence than the rest of the world normally was.

Kate thought of new technologies like the Kindle and Kobo and how, if she had one now, she could just download a new e-book and be done with all this worry. But she knew that, even if she could have afforded one, she would never bring herself to buy it. She would just have to be more diligent in the future and make sure she was never again caught without any reading material. She could never see herself reading a book on a small computer screen. Headaches aside, she needed the tactile sensations of a hardcover or paperback, preferably a used one with crinkled spine and yellowing pages. She didn't mind that previous owners might have treated the book

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less than reverently. She empathized with the slightly used and abused. Kate wasn't a Luddite by any means. She'd be the first to admit she hadn't bought a newspaper since she added *CNN.com* to her Internet favorites on the laptop at home and the desktop at her office. She just loved old books. She loved the romanticism they engendered. She loved the smell of their oft-perused pages.

Thinking of the last newspaper she had bought, a Special Edition about the crazy bastards who flew a couple of planes into the World Trade Center, Pentagon and some farmer's field in Pennsylvania, brought to mind her time with Tom yet again. She had bought the paper because she'd thought one day she could show it to her children. Tom used it to light the Yule log in the fireplace that holiday season. It didn't matter. By the following week her womb was gone and Tom was dead.

He had come home early from a New Year's Eve party that she couldn't attend because she was already sporting a lovely black eye, the result of a slightly burnt Christmas dinner. He stumbled through the front door; barely able to stand he was so drunk. Kate wasn't worried. If anything, she preferred dealing with him when he was in this kind of state. He failed to land most of the punches he threw. Those that did make contact lacked much of the power of the ones made when he was sober and paying much more strict attention to his *art*.

Almost as if sensing her lackadaisical response to the beating he was looking forward to administering, Tom flew into one of the worst rages she had ever seen.

"I'm plannin' on breakin' one a' my New Year's resolutions already, babe." He slurred, spittle flying from his bared teeth. "I was thinkin' of takin' it a bit more easy on ya this year. But ya know what they say 'bout New Year's resolutions? Like yer face, they was meant ta be broken."

He stormed across the living room and Kate, sitting in the old recliner, raised her arms and legs into a fetal position to minimize the areas he could hit. He surprised her by not raising his fists, but grabbing her hair instead and yanking her out of the chair. She had had her

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eyes squeezed shut in anticipation of the beating and was caught unawares by this sudden change in tactic. She was almost too surprised to put up any kind of struggle. She remained limp as he pulled her out of the living room and into the kitchen, the squeaking of the recliner as it rotated on rusty springs after her sudden, violent removal inexplicably amplified in her ears.

The fear that Tom might be going for a knife brought Kate back to her senses and she began to fight off her attacker. She thought she was getting free and felt a faint surge of hope when Tom loosened his grip on her. In the end, he was just allowing her some room to turn around in so she would be facing the counter instead of his body. Regaining a firm grip on the back of her head, he viciously slammed her face into the Formica countertop, simultaneously knocking out six teeth and breaking her nose. It blackened her other eye for good measure, but that was a matching accessory that wouldn't appear for a couple more hours.

He dropped his wife to the floor, and with grunts of immense satisfaction, kicked her in the abdomen half a dozen times. He either stopped because he was too winded to continue or because she vomited all over the linoleum floor. More than likely it was the former.

"Git up." He hissed, grabbing her by the hair yet again.

If she had been paying attention to the details, Kate would have been horrified to see a good portion of her locks had torn free in clumps. But considering the pulpy condition her face was in, she had bigger things to worry about anyways even if she had noticed. As it was, she found herself wondering how, in such an inebriated state, her husband could be so uncharacteristically coordinated. She thought of this with the same bemusement a master might look upon a puppy that learned a new trick all by itself.

Even in her weakened state, Kate was able to make it to her feet and avoided having the rest of her hair pulled out at the roots. She thought she heard Tom laughing manically and was relieved. His insanity was much

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better than the grim determination that had come through with every grunting kick to her midsection. She was dismayed a second later when, seeing him through eyes that had not yet fully swollen shut, she discovered it wasn't he who was laughing but her. Tom had managed to not only break her face as he had promised he would, but to shatter her sanity as well.

"Shut the fuck up, ya fuckin' cow." He yelled, enraged even further by the insanity he misinterpreted as mocking mirth.

He dragged her across the kitchen, leaving a bloody streak across the recently cleaned floor, to the cellar door, which had been left slightly ajar. Opening it all the way with the heel of his boot, he spun Kate around as if in a sick parody of a ballroom dance move, and shoved her down the wooden stairs. It was while she lay crumpled and broken on the concrete floor below that he issued the statement about divorce and dead wives, knowing that Kate would never have the courage or sense of self-worth to ever contemplate such an option.

Finally laughing himself, Tom left the house, slamming the front door shut behind him. Kate must have lost consciousness, although she didn't remember losing any time. She picked herself up, and on wobbly, unsteady legs, climbed the cellar steps. It must have taken her at least half an hour. She made it into the kitchen, down the hall, up yet another flight of stairs that, in her condition, were the equivalent of Everest, and into the bathroom on the second story. She washed her face gingerly, carefully applying pressure with a wet cloth. The whole excursion, which would have taken a healthy person less than two minutes to complete, took her two hours. The whole time she promised herself that this had been the last straw. She'd *never again* let Tom hurt her. She was going to leave him. And although she could barely maintain consciousness, she swore she would be out of the house before he came back.

But an hour after that, when the police arrived on her doorstep to inform her that her husband had died after

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wrapping his car around a telephone pole not three blocks from her house, she hadn't even packed a thing.

The loud DING indicating to the driver that someone wished to get off at the next stop broke the spell of memory that had come over Kate. She jumped in her seat at the noise, but no one around her noticed. She silently thanked God for the interruption, because if the memory had persisted she would have had to recall the aftermath of Tom's final beating and how, in the grand scheme of things, it was much worse than the actual assault itself had been.

Realizing that, however, brought the memory screaming to the forefront of her brain.

The police immediately called for an ambulance the moment they saw her. Although she told them she had suffered the wounds by falling down the cellar stairs (a half-truth, in her mind), there was no doubt they knew the real story. But since the culprit was now only three inches wide across the chest, crushed between driver's seat and engine block, the cops felt no need to press the issue. They did recommend she see a professional therapist when better, but didn't go any further than that. There was no need to level assault charges against a corpse. In the hospital, Kate discovered that, due to the fall down the stairs and the repeated kicks to her stomach, she needed to have an emergency hysterectomy to stop some serious internal bleeding. When she was finally able to maintain lucidity for more than 5 minutes at a time, she had only two visitors, both business related. The first was Doctor King, telling her she would never be able to have children, the second, a lawyer with paperwork for her to sign. Being the sole beneficiary, she inherited all of Tom's worldly goods, which amounted to nothing but debt. She had to sell the house in order to pay off his long list of creditors. She spent four weeks in the hospital doing what all of the nurses, doctors and rehab specialists told her she needed to do. By the time she was discharged, she was almost back to normal, but would always have a small scar above her left eye, fake dental work and a nose that resembled a prizefighter's.

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The first thing she did when she got out was answer a classified advertisement for a room to rent with another woman her age. Then she found a job at the McDonald staffing agency downtown. After a shaky interview, they gave her the receptionist job instead of placing her elsewhere, as they themselves were short-staffed at the time.

And eight years passed in relative peace.

Well, physical peace, at least. Her mind still couldn't let go of the horrors she had endured. Now, on the bus with still a number of stops to go before her own, she looked at the woman across the aisle from her with envy. Not because she more than likely had never had to suffer the pain Kate did, but because even if she had, at least she had a book to help hold those memories at bay.

Thinking of the book drew Kate's attention to it. The front cover was a painting of nightmarish proportions and the back was a full-page black and white photograph of the author. Apparently he was successful enough to not need that space for a synopsis of the work or praise from peers or reviewers. Focusing on the photo a little more carefully, Kate was taken aback. She knew this man. Or at least she did 25 years ago. He was older now, with glasses and a receding hairline, but she was still positive the author was Michael Brooks, one of the so-called friends from her youth. She quickly looked back at the front of the book, which required leaning over slightly, as the woman reading it had made her way onto the right-hand page and was tilting it. The cover painting was of a group of macabre monsters and ghoulish demons. A third of the artwork was hidden beneath embossed gold lettering. Kate read it, disbelieving the information her eyes delivered to her brain. She read it a second and third time just to be sure she had put the letters together correctly and wasn't suffering from spontaneous dyslexia.

*The Open Door* by Michael Brooks

*Holy shit*, she thought. Even though a voracious reader, she steered clear of the horror genre. She felt she had lived through more than enough for 10 lifetimes already, and had no use in adding more, even if it was



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fictional. Her tastes tended to lean more towards Robert Frost than Robert McCammon. It was no surprise that she hadn't come across Michael's work before at the store where she shopped. The woman holding it discovered Kate's intense scrutiny of the tome and started to stare back. Kate forced a weak smile in her direction and looked away. Normally she would have been reduced to a quivering mass of jelly for being caught staring at someone like that, but her mind was now preoccupied with wonder. And a strange sense of inexplicable dread.

The small strip mall where Kate bought most of her groceries and household items was only a few stops past hers. When the bus came to her usual stop, she remained on board, going there instead of directly home. When it eventually reached the stop in front of the mall, the bus disgorged the last of its passengers, resembling a beached whale vomiting copious amounts of plankton onto the side of the street.

There was a large bookstore in the mall, probably because out in this rural area, where cable and Internet connections were much dodgier, people had to find some other, more reliable, means of entertainment. She rarely shopped there, preferring the used bookstore in the city two blocks from where she worked. She asked a clerk to point her in the direction of the horror section and found it was relatively small compared to the others, with three of the five shelves dedicated to the genre consisting of only three authors – King, Koontz and Michael Brooks. With such a limited market, Kate wondered how any of the other horror writers ever managed to eek out a living. Perhaps that was why most of them wrote books about vampires, zombies and classic monster mash-ups that seemed indistinguishable from each other.

Kate scanned the Brooks section, reading titles such as *Youth of America*, *The Cove*, *Between Moons*, *Jr. Death* and *Zombie Apocalypse*. There was also a short story collection entitled *Night Time Tales of Terror*, its cover a large, red-hued skull just daring people to open the book and read its pages, but Kate settled on *The Open Door*. She had no idea which book had come out first, and even

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though she liked to read an author's work chronologically, opted for the title that had originally caught her eye on the bus. For some reason she couldn't quite explain, she was drawn to it. When she picked it up she actually felt the hairs on her arms rise, as if the book gave off a static discharge. She made her way to the counter and purchased it. Being as accustomed as she was to only buying used books, she was shocked to find the trade cost 20 dollars.

Outside the mall, Kate had to wait another 15 minutes for the bus to return and take her home. The book was in a small plastic bag that had the name of the store printed on the side in bright red letters. She felt like she was holding a ticking time bomb, and the only way to diffuse it was to remove it from the bag and begin reading. But she couldn't. Not there. Her hands were shaking too much. She felt it was a task best accomplished in private.

The bus finally arrived and she went home. When she walked through the front door she saw her roommate, Clare, sitting on the couch in the living room, watching game shows. Kate hid the purchase behind her back like a child trying to hide something from the prying eyes of their mother.

"Hey, kiddo, how was work?" Clare asked, never taking her eyes from the screen and making Kate's attempts at subterfuge all the more ludicrous.

"Fine, fine," Kate said. "Do you need to get into the bathroom for any reason? I'm beat and want to have a bath."

"Knock yourself out." Clare replied.

Kate forced herself to not run into the small room. It wasn't until she was behind the closed door that she realized she hadn't even bothered to take off her shoes. She turned the faucet on and a stream of hot, steaming water began to fill the tub. She inserted the plug stopper, dried her hands on a towel and sat on the toilet. She carefully removed the book from the bag as if she was handling plutonium. She set it on the lip of the bath and stripped out of her clothes. She slid into the water, and taking a deep breath, opened the book, turning directly to

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the 'About the Author' information. She had no doubt she once knew the man it spoke of, but had to be doubly sure.

"Michael Brooks is the author of more than a dozen best-selling novels, screenplays and poetry collections. He is a three-time winner of the Bram Stoker award and two-time recipient of the Hugo award for best novel. He grew up in \_\_\_\_\_, but now resides in New York, where he is currently at work on his next project."

*Well*, Kate thought, *that seals the deal*. They had grown up in the same small town.

She went back to the beginning, flipping past the few pages of publishing info, dedication and an excerpt of poetry, stopping when she reached the first chapter. She began to read and was disconcerted to discover she already knew the story. She had lived it. Michael Brooks had written about the summer they were last together and had passed it off as fiction. Even though the names had been changed to protect the guilty, she could tell Michael, of course, was the main character. It also starred Porter Johnson, Vic Tomlinson and herself, who he claimed the boys kept around out of pity more than anything else. He wrote about finding the book of the Occult in the stuff from his parent's attic and the ritual they had performed from it at the gazebo in the park. The ritual that had opened a door to another dimension of pure evil. The ritual that had left one of them dead by week's end, and according to the author, the rest of them tainted. Tainted by an evil they could never escape that spread like swine flu or the common cold until, in the end, it found and destroyed them all.

Three hours later, unable to get a response from Kate, Clare frantically rushed out of the apartment to elicit the help of their next-door neighbor, a volunteer fireman named Allan. She pounded on his door, and after a moment or two, moments that Clare felt she could not afford to lose, he answered.

"Jesus, what's wrong, Clare? You're pounding as if your hair was on fire."

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“Come quick, Allan, I need your help!” Clare said, grabbing him by the shirt collar. She dragged him out of his apartment and into hers, pulling him towards the closed bathroom door. “She’s been in there forever. I’ve tried calling her and she won’t answer. Fuck, what if she’s drowned. Or worse.”

“Worse than having drowned?” Allan asked incredulously. “What could be worse than that?”

“You don’t know Kate like I do. She’s had a pretty hard life, although she’d never talk to me or anyone else about it. You can just tell, though. You can see it in her face, especially her eyes. She has this kind of haunted, sad look. Oh God, the razors I use to shave my legs are in there! Kick the door in!”

“Hold on, wait a second.” Allan said, banging a fist on the door before taking more drastic measures. “Kate? Hey, Kate! You awake in there?”

“Kick it in.” Clare said, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

“Kate?” Allan said again, growing more nervous, Clare’s concern starting to infect him. “Say something, Kate.”

“Kick the fucking door in!” Clare screamed.

And almost as a knee-jerk reaction to Clare’s sudden, screeching demand, he did just that, kicking the door hard enough to splinter the frame. It swung inward and revealed... an empty bathroom. Kate and her clothes were gone; the only indication that she had been having a bath was the tub still full of now tepid tap water.

“Is this a joke?” Allan asked, looking at Clare.

“I swear it isn’t.” She replied. “She was in here, having a bath.”

“Well, she must have left without you noticing.”

“But she would have drained the tub.” Clare said, all of her concern now converted to confusion. “And the door was locked from the inside.”

“Weirder things have happened.”

“Not really.” Clare said, more to herself than her neighbor.

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“How long was she in here, anyways?” Allan asked.

“A few hours.”

“See, she must have left when you weren’t looking. Who stays in the tub for hours at a time?”

“She does.” Clare said. “She often stays in here until I bang on the door to use the bathroom. She’d lose track of time reading. It wasn’t at all unlike her to get lost in a good book.”

### **The Present Past**

Kate awoke as if from a dream, flat on her back. She felt the cool, wooden planks of the surface beneath her, and saw a peaked roof made from the same material directly above. The wood was painted blue and had once been vibrant, but was now faded to a near gray. It was flecked in many places and graffiti, mostly the names of young lovers and popular bands, was scrawled all over it. She began to sit up and winced in pain as her body fought against the stiffness that seemed to be encasing all of her joints. She rubbed the back of her neck and looked around at her new, yet familiar, surroundings.

She was in the gazebo in the center of the park in the town where she had grown up. For a brief moment she thought she was dreaming. She figured that reading Michael’s novel, wherein the main action took place at this location, had caused her subconscious to conjure up this image as she dreamt. If she was dreaming, she was sleeping, and since she was in the tub she could drown. But somehow she knew this was not the case. Things felt too real. The air on her skin, the uneven, uncomfortable flooring beneath her bottom. No, this wasn’t a dream. Nor was she worried that she had drowned and died. Not that she had any point of reference as to what it would be like once she passed, but she felt it wouldn’t be anything like this. After spending so many years with Tom, she felt she had a pretty good grasp on what it would be like to be dead.

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That left only one explanation, regardless of how inexplicable, and that was she had somehow been transported out of her bathtub and back to her old hometown. Trying to wrap her head around that mystery left no time to wonder how she had gotten dressed or why she was no longer wet.

Kate stood up, feeling pins and needles racing through her legs as they slowly began to wake as well. A very strong head rush forced her to lean against the side of the gazebo before she lost her balance and fell to the ground. Waiting for the momentary unpleasantness to pass, she looked at the park around her. It was evening and the scene was lit by sporadically placed lampposts, contrasting most of what she could see with deep, impenetrable shadows. She thought she caught a glimpse of movement in one of them but ascribed the sudden disturbance more to the fact that branches from a nearby tree appeared to be blowing in the wind. She noticed something under a nearby hedge, but more movement to her left distracted her yet again. *Just more wind*, she thought, even though feeling no wind herself.

Regaining her composure, both physically and mentally as best she figured she'd be able to under the bizarre circumstances, Kate stepped from the gazebo and slowly began making her way across the park, the gravel of the pathway crunching beneath her shoes disturbing the otherwise silent world around her. The sound was empty and hollow. The air tasted stale in her mouth and all of the colors seemed slightly washed out. It was like she was looking at an old Polaroid picture, the image overexposed, taken with too strong of a flash. She stopped moving and listened closely. Once the sound of the rocks settling beneath her feet came to a stop, she could hear nothing but her own steady heartbeat and quickened breathing. There was no sound of crickets or cars, people or any other thing that could generate audio vibrations. She saw no signs of life and instinctively knew the town was deserted. With the exception of that which she believed blew in the non-existent wind, there was no movement. From time to time she caught glimpses in her peripheral

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vision, but the form was so nondescript she assumed it was just her mind playing tricks on her, trying to process all of the impossible data that had been assaulting it ever since she awoke on the floor of the gazebo.

Kate reached the park entrance and saw the red, white and blue streamers that adorned the wrought iron gate and fencing that ran the length of the perimeter. She remembered, as a young girl, that this was how the town hall committee decorated for the Fourth of July celebrations. Her father, almost always too busy for her, still made the time to take her to the festival every year. He'd buy her hotdogs and snow cones and she'd just start to believe it was because he loved her when he'd go into his 'God Bless America' rant like every other year. The hotdogs and snow cones were just a way to butter her up before he delivered his patriotic indoctrinations. He was a military man from a military family and had served his country proudly in Vietnam. His father was killed at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked. He didn't expect his girl to enlist, heaven's no, because for him a woman's place was in the kitchen, but he did demand that she acknowledge the greatness of the country he had put his life on the line to defend. He died from a heart attack in the mid-90s, and Kate always wondered how fervent his idealism would have remained had he lived to see the second Bush's years in office. Then again, he served under Nixon, so you never could tell.

Giving her head a quick shake, wondering how she could be thinking of such things at a time like this, Kate left the park and crossed the intersection at Bay and Brown, stopping to look both ways from force of habit rather than the belief that any vehicles were actually traveling the streets. She also found herself waiting for the light to change from DON'T WALK to WALK, but after a minute or so realized the signals were as stationary as the rest of the world around her.

There were no cars on the street with corpses sitting behind the wheels. The scene didn't look like one where the world had suddenly come to an end, catching everyone unawares. Nor did it look like people were

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making a mad dash for the hills as the world slowly unraveled around them. It appeared as if everyone had just up and disappeared. Her old hometown looked more like a movie set, with all of the stage dressing but none of the actors.

The movie analogy probably came to Kate's mind because she was approaching the small theater that put the Drive-In on the outskirts of town out of business. She looked up at the marquee and saw *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was showing. A schedule was taped to the inside glass of the ticket booth in the center of the open lobby, and Kate moved forward to inspect it further. Looking at the dates for which the Steve Spielberg film would be showing, she discovered it was mid-July, 1984.

Considering everything that had already happened, this sudden shifting in time didn't surprise her. If she could climb into a tub in one part of the state and wake up in a gazebo in another, why not go 25 years into the past as well. But that wasn't why her throat was constricting and her hands were clenching nervously.

*Why this year?* She thought. *Of all the years, why did it have to be this one?*

Remembering again the Michael Brooks novel, she began to understand. 1984 was the summer he had fictionalized in *The Open Door*. It was the last summer she lived here, the last summer Vic had lived at all, and as she had back at the gazebo, she wondered if what she had been reading previous to her arrival was somehow affecting her current reality.

Stepping back from the glass, Kate caught the reflection of some pale, lifeless and eerily familiar person standing directly behind her. She let out a shriek and spun around wildly, only to discover no one there. She took a step forward, looked up and down the street, but saw nothing. The place was as deserted as she had previously believed it to be.

Until a hand reached out from behind her and tapped her gently on the shoulder.

"Howdy." Said a male's voice. "Remember me?"



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Kate turned again, half expecting to see the zombie-like phantom she had caught a glimpse of in the ticket booth window. Instead, she was greeted by the smiling visage of Porter Johnson. He, like the author photo of Michael, had changed over the years since she last saw him, but he was still instantly recognizable even though now completely bald, sweating profusely and at least 60 pounds more overweight. He was a tightly wound bundle of nervous energy, even his jowls were shaking as his body quivered with excitement. He was wearing a novelty t-shirt with the words I'M NOT OVERWEIGHT, IT'S MY T-SHIRT THAT'S FAT printed on it. He proffered a pudgy hand to Kate, and she shook it incredulously.

"Porter?" She said.

"Got it on one." Her old friend replied. "Good to see ya, Kate. We've been waiting a long time."

Kate's head was reeling with questions. *Who are 'we'? What was going on? How long were you waiting? Why?* But, in the end, all she managed was...

"How's it going?"

Porter's laugh was almost infectious. He kneeled over, slapping his knees with both hands, his face turning a bright red as he ran out of breath. Kate was worried he'd have a heart attack before she could get any information out of him.

"Going great, Kate. A real honest to God barrel of monkeys!"

"Sorry." Kate said, almost mumbling. "It was a pretty stupid question."

"Don't beat yourself up over it, kid." Porter said, pulling a crumpled package of Marlboros from one coat pocket, a box of Red Bird strike anywhere matches from another. He lit the smoke, exhaled, and started laughing again, the chuckle turning into a wheezing cough.

"Maybe you should quit." Kate said, instantly regretting it. She hoped she hadn't offended possibly the only other person in this world, although she was sure he had said 'we' just moments before.

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“Fuck it.” Porter said, taking a long haul off of the cigarette. “Not like the little bastards can kill me anyway.”

Kate, remembering her self-recriminations for bringing up the idea of his quitting, kept her mouth shut at the statement, but Porter didn’t fail to notice the confused look that crossed her features after he said it.

“You’re probably thinking of cancer or heart disease or strokes or any of the other things they warn ya about on those silly little labels, aren’t you?” He said. “No worries there, Mon Cher, I don’t think I could get ‘em even if I wanted to. I don’t think I could die if I put a loaded pistol into my pie hole and pulled the trigger. Brooks tried once, or so he says, and woke up the next damn moment back in the gazebo. Nope, I don’t think we can bite it until we’ve done whatever it was we were sent back here to do.”

“What are we doing here?” Kate asked.

“Well, no, I’m getting ahead of myself. Best to leave the telling of that up to Mikey, seeing as how it’s his theory and all. Anything else ya want to know about, though, feel free to ask.”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

Porter, shrugging his shoulders as if to say that wasn’t his problem, tossed the cigarette to the ground, and although she thought it must have been a trick of the light, Kate was sure it extinguished before ever touching the sidewalk.

“Noticed that too, did ya?” Porter said, arching his eyebrow and smiling as if he had just performed a clever slight of hand. “Might as well start there. Ya see, most everything in this world is dead. Or stale. Or broken. Or whatever. But once we make physical contact with it, it works. Notice how I lit my smoke with a match? That’s ‘cause with a lighter, there’s no actual physical contact made with the butane in it. I touched the sulfur tip of the match with my thumb, and presto bango, instant flame. Same goes with food, too. Although I really don’t think we need to eat. I don’t think Michael has eaten anything in over a decade. Me, well, you can see for yourself that I like my food, but I haven’t gained a pound since getting here.”

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“How long have you been here?” Kate asked, trying not to get hung up on the many useless details he seemed to like to pepper his answers with. Or contradictions, such as how Michael could shoot himself even though he couldn’t work a lighter.

“I dunno.” Porter said, lighting another cigarette, this time doing it more slowly to demonstrate to Kate what he had just explained. “Last thing I remember was being at the school. It was almost the end of the year and all the kids were talking about how much the new *Star Wars* movie sucked. June of ’99, I think. How about you?”

“What were you still doing in school? You must have been in your thirties.” Kate said, doing the math in her head and hoping to avoid answering his question. For some reason she couldn’t yet explain, she felt that being privy to information that Porter or Michael didn’t have could work to her advantage. She was almost more surprised at her cunning in this situation than she was of actually being in it.

“I’m the principal, can yaw fucking believe that!” Porter said, laughing again. “Job doesn’t take much, though. I’m really just a glorified prison warden.”

“So,” Kate said. “You said things only work when you touch them?”

“Yep. Doesn’t really work with anything too complex, though. Too many parts to actually touch. You couldn’t get a car up and running, but you can make a bike work. Michael and I decided to bike as far as we could once, see how far this limbo land actually goes, and can ya believe it, even though I can eat all I want and not gain anything, it doesn’t matter how much I exercise I still won’t shed a pound. I’ve exercised more since being here then I have in my entire life, needing as you do to walk or bike anywhere. Thank God it’s a small town. That seems to me like the biggest cosmic kick in the nuts since God started dishing them out. Although I guess things balance out, since I’ve eaten more here as well.”

“What happened?” Kate inquired, trying to steer him back on topic.

“What happened with what?”

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“How far did you and Michael get?” She asked. If she weren’t so timid she’d probably get very tired of Porter Johnson before long.

“Oh.” He said, tossing aside the second cigarette. “We both blacked out the minute we crossed the city limits and woke up back in the gazebo.”

“Did you wake up the next day?”

“Ain’t no days around here, honey.” Porter said, spitting up a wad of phlegm. “It’s always night time. That’s probably why we don’t need to eat or sleep. Why we can’t die, why we don’t go crazy. It’s just... this. All the time.”

Kate didn’t think Porter was stupid, but she knew he wasn’t this self-aware, either. It wasn’t hard to gather that he was more than likely parroting the stuff Michael had already deduced. If she was only going to be getting second-hand theorems from Porter, she figured why waste her time and go straight to the source.

“Maybe we should go see Michael now.” She suggested.

“Yes, that’s what we should do.” Porter said, leading her away from the theater. “But listen, ya gotta do me a solid, okay?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Don’t let him know I wasn’t there when you woke up, okay?”

“Sure.” Kate said, confused. “You were waiting for me?”

“I was supposed to be, yeah. But shit, it’s boring doing it night after night or whatever. Michael and I take turns, but he’s been busy writing a new story lately so he put me in charge. I don’t mind, after all his stories are fun to read and help pass the time that doesn’t ever seem to actually pass around here. The three ‘R’s’, right? Reading, writing and arithmetic. Guess we don’t give a shit about spelling, hunh? Anyway, I couldn’t take it any longer so I went to the movies. It’s hard getting the projector to work. You need to hold the machine with one hand and let the edge of the filmstrip just graze the side of your finger as it spools through the reels. Takes hours just to get the movie done. I’d much rather have a working TV to watch Friends

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or something, but I don't think NBC is broadcasting in this time zone. And even though I musta watched that Indy flick at least a thousand times since landing back here, it sure beats doing nothing."

"How long has Michael been here?"

"Since '89." Porter answered. "He never left. That's why they got him first."

"What do you mean?" She asked. "What about Vic? He was with us the night we performed the ritual. We can't possibly be waiting for him as well, can we?"

Porter lit another cigarette, not because he wanted one but because Kate's line of questioning was obviously making him uncomfortable. He fumbled with the match in his fingers like a bad actor until he dropped it to the ground in an attempt to mask his nervousness. When he answered, he didn't have to look up and make eye contact.

"Why don't we just wait till we get to Mikey's before we try and figure everything out?"

"Okay." Kate said, backing off.

"Wait. How did you know all of this has to do with the ritual?" Porter asked, standing and locking his eyes onto hers, looking for any signs of evasiveness or guilt.

"I dunno." Kate lied, not wanting to tell him about finding Michael's future book. "Lucky guess?"

"Well," He continued, backing off a little of his own, the nervous edge that had recently crept into his voice slowly subsiding. "We think it has to do with the ritual, too."

"So, how did it bring you back here?" Kate asked, hoping that if Porter got to be the center of attention once again his jovial demeanor would return.

"I'll tell you since you know it's because of the ritual." He said. "If you know that, then you might also know that what happened wasn't my fault, right?"

"Right." Kate agreed, not knowing what Porter was talking about at all.

But after hearing his tale, she did try to convince herself that what he said was true, that it wasn't his fault.

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She wouldn't be able to stand the site of him otherwise.

### *Porter's Story*

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Porter Johnson was an only child from a well-to-do family, and therefore was lavished upon most of his life. As a child, he grew accustomed to always having things go his way. If he wanted a toy, he needed only to ask for it. He never once had to throw a tantrum in a crowded shopping mall or wake up disappointed on Christmas morning. If he wanted to stay up late to watch more television, a simple scowl was more than enough to stifle his parent's suggestion that he make his way to bed. If he felt like desert instead of dinner, his plate of vegetables would be quickly replaced with a bowl of vanilla ice cream smothered in hot fudge.

After the events of that summer in 1984, when Vic's body could not be found and Porter began having terrible nightmares, becoming too afraid to even leave the house, his parents, in lieu of taking him to a doctor or therapist, simply packed up and left town. They weren't the only ones. A lot of families moved away from \_\_\_\_\_ that year, but not because their teenaged son suggested it, as Porter had. Something had happened and he was scared, but rather than press the point, his parent simply complied with his request, and for many years after, Porter was fine.

As he grew up, Porter didn't become the asshole that most suspected he would after having had everything in life handed to him with little or no effort. He grew up happy, with a pleasant and positive disposition, unlike most other spoiled brats. He still got his way more times than not because his joyful attitude left people feeling inclined to go out of their way for him. Like the old adage said, good things happened to good people. At least they did to this particular happy man.

After graduating from high school, he received a degree in childhood development from the local community college. Even though his grades weren't the

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best, when a vacancy opened up on the local school board committee, his overall sense of good humor won over the selection panel and he was brought on board to help with a variety of academic endeavors. Two years later, when the principal of the combined Elementary and High School retired, Porter placed his name in the running for the position, and that same disposition landed him the gig over other, more qualified applicants. He was only 26 and became the youngest person to ever hold the position in that district.

He had been on the job for almost five years when everything fell apart. When Michael Brook's evil ripple finally caught up to him.

Even though he was almost twice as old as the female students under his protection, he didn't consider himself a pedophile for lusting after them. If people saw how early those girls developed, or the clothes their parents allowed them to leave the house in, well, any red-blooded, self-respecting male would have been hard pressed to constrain himself too. And they surrounded him all day long! It was like expecting an alcoholic to not have a drink while working at a tavern. Shit, as far as Porter was concerned, most of the girls could have easily passed for 18 anyway. However, being their Principal and privy to their personal files, he was well aware that they were not.

His worst and last indiscretion began when Hilary, a cheerleader, was sent to his office because of her inappropriate attire. Her skirt didn't fall to the regulated length of the knee, and her homeroom teacher told her she'd have to go home and change. Hilary protested and was sent to Porter's office like an angelic gift from God.

"So, what's the problem, Hilary?" Porter asked when the young girl entered his office. He asked the question even though he was already staring at the problem.

"Miss Haversham says I have to go home and change." Hilary said, pouting.

If Porter ever had to take the stand in a court of law for what was about to happen, he would have pleaded innocence based solely on the fact that, once in trouble,

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young Hilary turned on all her seductress' charms to get her way. She knew what she was doing. And if that plea failed, then he'd have gone with insanity, because the site of those long, slender legs going all the way up into forever was driving him crazy.

"What seems to be the problem with your attire?"

Porter said, swallowing the lump that had formed in his throat. He was starting to get flushed.

"She says my dress is too short. I don't think it is, do you?"

Porter swallowed hard again. His breathing turned into a near pant and he started to sweat.

"I don't know." He stammered. "Dress code calls for a skirt to be no higher than an inch from the knee. How high are those?"

"I don't know, silly." Hilary said, giggling. "I didn't measure them before I left the house this morning."

"Well," Porter said nervously, knowing he was about to cross a strict no-no line but still unable to stop himself. *She wanted him to, didn't she?* He hoped to God that she did. "Come over here and I'll check."

Hilary crossed the office, made her way around Porter's desk and invitingly thrust out her leg. Porter, grabbing a ruler from off of his desk blotter and began measuring the distance of the exposed skin between the hem of Hilary's skirt and her knobby knee.

"Sorry." He said meekly, his hands trembling. "I'm a little nervous."

"That's okay, Mr. Johnson." Hilary said. "You're doing great."

Porter measured the point of contention and found it to be four inches above regulation. Although the task was complete, his hand kept moving upwards, past the end of the plastic ruler, beneath her skirt and not stopping until he felt the frilly edges of her satin...

When Bobby Saunders walked in without knocking, the spell of fantasy was broken. Porter looked up and saw that Hilary was not looking down upon him flirtatiously, as he thought she had been, but was in fact weeping silently, her black mascara running down her



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cheeks. She wasn't shaking with excitement, but trembling with fear. So used to always getting his way, Porter didn't even stop to think that she wasn't willfully going along for the ride. In his confusion, Porter failed to remove his hand from beneath her skirt and Bobby noticed it immediately.

"Oh my God." The boy said, turning and fleeing from the office.

Porter was up and out of his chair in a matter of seconds. He barely even realized he knocked Hilary to the ground in his haste to do so. He stopped for one second to rearrange the erection that was pressing unpleasantly against the front of his pants before continuing the pursuit.

Bobby, the would-have-been valedictorian, ran out the front doors of the school. If he had walked in on another teacher and caught him doing what Porter had been doing, he would have gone straight to the Principal's office. But since it was the principal he saw, he was confused and didn't know where to go. He just had to get away from the school, and the man who ran it, to figure things out. A thousand thoughts were racing through his mind, first and foremost anger that Mr. Mollin had picked that particular moment in time to ask him to visit the Principal's office to ask when he could expect the arrival of the new algebra textbooks. And at himself for forgetting to knock. He couldn't care less about the transgression itself, he just wished he wasn't the one who would have to deal with it.

So wrapped up in his thoughts, and not wanting to slow down, Bobby wasn't thinking clearly when he dashed into the street without checking first for traffic. A mid-sized car hit him almost immediately, sending him flying through the air. He landed in the oncoming lane about 12 feet away, dazed, bruised and slightly cut, but otherwise unharmed. The car coming in that lane had enough time to slam on the breaks and came to a screeching halt mere inches from Bobby's head.

Bobby, bracing himself on the ground as if he could somehow survive the impact, let out a sigh of relief when he wasn't hit. It was just like in the movies, when the hero falls onto the street and the car stops just in the nick

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of time. Just as he was about to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, a second car, traveling too fast behind the one that had managed to stop in time, rear-ended the first vehicle. Bobby only heard the crunching of metal for a split second before the first car was nudged forward and the front tire rolled onto his head. The tire failed to clear the adolescent hurdle, and the entire front end of the vehicles weight came down to bear on Bobby's skull. It split open like a watermelon, his eyeballs popping free from their sockets and landing in the nearby rain gutter, where they floated past a storm grate and were never seen again.

Porter, 60 pounds overweight, had been forced to slow his pace considerably, a sharp pain beginning to stab the left side of his chest. Kneeling over, trying to catch his breath, he was far enough away from the accident that no one in the vicinity thought he had had anything to do with it.

Shaking uncontrollably, he went back to the school and locked himself in his office. He took a shot from the whiskey bottle he kept squirreled away in a drawer of his desk to steady his nerves. When that failed to accomplish the task, he had four more. He stopped there, even though a noticeable tremor still danced across in his fingers. He needed to keep his mind clear if he was going to be able to think of some excuse to get out of this. For the first time in his life, he feared things might not actually turn out the way he wanted them to.

But in the end, Hilary, so horrified by what had happened, went home to change without saying a thing to anyone. No one could explain why Bobby had been off school grounds. When asked if he had come by as he was supposed to, Porter said he hadn't seen the young honor student all day. Hilary didn't contradict his testimony. What she did do was quit the cheerleading team, traded in her short skirts for baggy sweatpants, and started drinking heavily.

By the end of the day, Porter assumed he had actually gotten away with it. His near-perfect record of

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always getting things his way remained untarnished, and he went to bed that night with a smile on his face.

He awoke to find himself on the floor of the gazebo, trapped back in 1984.

### **The Present Past, Again**

“And that’s when I first saw... him.” Porter said, throwing a nervous glance over his shoulder as if whoever ‘he’ was was still around.

“Who’s ‘him?’” Kate asked, hoping Porter wouldn’t ask her opinion of him after hearing the tale he had just told, searching for an absolution she could not give, no matter how accustomed she was to cowing to people in the past.

“At first I wasn’t sure.” He answered. “He was like a shadow. A blur. But eventually I saw him for what he was. Barry Saunders. His head was, well, flattened. He had no eyes, but could somehow still see me. I ran from him, but it seemed that no matter how fast I ran or wherever I hid, he still found me. And I could run pretty fast, too. I don’t get winded here like I did back in the real world. Maybe because there’s no wind so how could I? But it wasn’t enough. He always found me, pointing accusingly with crooked, broken fingers. You see, that’s why we’ve been taking turns keeping an eye out for you. Michael and me, I mean. He didn’t know when I was coming so he wasn’t waiting. When I showed up, we started putting the pieces together and knew to expect you next.”

“How did you guys find each other?” Kate asked.

“It’s such a small town I think we would’ve run into each other eventually, but what happened was I just started freaking out on Main Street, screaming at the top of my lungs, causing a ruckus. I eventually threw a garbage can through a store window, and with little or no sounds to compete with it, the sound of the smashing glass traveled and Michael, from where he’s holed up, heard it and came out to investigate. He explained to me his theories about Barry and how, when you showed up, we

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should be there to intercept you before you encountered your own version.”

“What are they exactly?”

“Well, they’re the reminders of the things we’ve done. They’re the result of the evil that has tainted us ever since the ritual. We think they’re here to stop us. To get the revenge in this world that they couldn’t get in the other.”

Kate thought of the reflection she glanced in the window of the ticket booth back at the local theater. She hadn’t been able to make it out, but it had left her with the impression of something not alive. After all these years, she worried that Tom had somehow managed to find a way to get to her again after all. She swallowed hard at the thought and threw her own nervous glance over her shoulder. However, she couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong with Porter and Michael’s assessment of the apparitions and the roles they were playing. If they were indeed vengeful spirits, she couldn’t understand how, after all these years, a decade for Porter and two for Michael, they could not have succeeded in exacting their revenge. But that thought did little to alleviate her concern that, at any moment, she might come face to face with Tom Patterson, as if he had just crawled out of the grave to torment her one last time.

“That’s why Michael would be so pissed if he found out I wasn’t there at the gazebo the moment you arrived.” Porter continued. “You didn’t see anything, did you?”

“No, nothing.” Kate lied, not wanting to talk about Tom and the dominating role he had played in her life should Porter ask for further explanation.

“Thank God.” Porter said, so happy he hadn’t screwed up he failed to notice her deception. “We’re gonna need all of us on board if Michael’s plan is to work. We’d be dead in the water if something had gotten to you first.”

“What’s this plan of yours all about?”

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It seemed as if Porter was about to tell her when they rounded the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and began to make their way down 10<sup>th</sup> Street, but he didn't continue.

"I'll let Mikey explain it to you." Porter said. "We're here."

'Here' was the Orinco 24-hour gas station halfway down the street. They walked toward the well-lit structure, the fluorescent lights of the gas bar out front giving their skin an unhealthy luster. Porter stopped in front of one of the pumps, and ignoring the now useless 'FLAMMABLE MATERIAL – NO OPEN FLAMES' sign, struck a match and lit the cigarette that had been dangling from his lips for the past couple of blocks.

"I'll be in in a minute." He said, exhaling smoke. "Mikey doesn't like me smoking in there. I think he's afraid I'm gonna somehow burn all of his stories or something with a wayward ash. Not likely. You remember what happened when I dropped the cigarette before? He's just a little paranoid. Go on in, he's been expecting you."

Kate waited a moment, hesitant to enter the structure without Porter at her side. She had never really liked him, and now, after the story he had told, downright despised him, but there was something comforting about not having to walk into this place alone. If she were dealing with the mob, Porter would be a goon and Michael the Godfather. Muscle might be scary, but the mastermind that flexed that muscle was scarier still.

She stepped through the once motion-sensor controlled pneumatic doors, now propped open by a case of Coca-Cola. She expected the gas station to resemble every other one she had ever been in before (and being from a military family that constantly moved, she had been in a lot), but this one had undergone some drastic renovations over the past 20 years. It was a large, open-spaced concept; the shelves to display the overpriced items for the impulse or after-hours shopper had all been removed and replaced with a few pieces of furniture and a large number of filing cabinets. There were well-stocked bookshelves, the place resembling a reading room in a library more than an old gas station. A throw rug had been

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laid over the tiled floor, and frames on the walls which originally housed advertisements or listed gas prices now sported random movie posters more than likely pilfered from the theater where she encountered Porter.

A few fluorescent tubes lit the room dimly. Most of the others had been removed from the long, rectangular casings that still covered the ceiling in order to generate the homely effect. There were a few plants that, even in a world of perpetual night time, still looked healthy. Kate figured they didn't need to be watered, either. Like everything else in this world, they would remain as they were forever, never blossoming further, never withering away or dying. Kate figured Michael had chosen to make house in the Orinco station because, being open 24 hours, the lights were already on when he arrived, a feat he wouldn't have been able to replicate at a location swaddled in darkness. That he also chose the site because he had worked there before she would soon find out. Looking at the filing cabinets he had filled over the past 20 years, Kate understood how Michael managed to be so prolific in the real world. In *her* world. He wrote his *oeuvre* in a place where time stood still.

"Hello, Katherine." He said, stepping from behind heavy curtains that had been screwed into the ceiling in the corner to partition it from the rest of the room, creating a makeshift bedroom. "Welcome to my home away from home."

Even though Kate had not seen or spoken to Michael since she was a kid, she had seen the author photograph of him on the back of his book and figured she knew what he would look like. But the man before her was not the same as the one in the black and white picture. He looked almost as he had when she last saw him as a teenager. Less acne, but still young. He looked younger than her even though he was technically two years older. He appeared to be in his early 20's, when he was in actuality 41 or 42 years old. He had a cold, determined look in his eyes that most 20-year olds lacked, and was wearing an all black suit. Kate was instantly reminded of Dr. Faustus and her heart skipped a beat. Michael Brooks

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terrified her from the moment she first laid eyes on him in this world.

“Hi, Mike.” She said timidly.

Just then, to Kate’s relief, Porter walked in, whistling a cheery tune. Michael shot him such a steely glare that he instantly shut up.

“I assume everything went well?” Michael asked him.

“Without a hitch, glitch or stitch.” Porter said, chuckling nervously and looking to Kate. The look in his eyes pleaded with her not to divulge the fact that he was nowhere to be found when she materialized in the park. She didn’t give him away.

“Excellent.” Michael said, walking across the room with purpose. “Then we’re good to go.”

“Wait,” Kate said nervously. “Go where? I still don’t even know what’s going on.”

Michael eyed Porter questioningly, and when the object of his scrutiny only shrugged his shoulders, he looked back at Kate appraisingly.

“You’re older.” He said. “When are you from?”

As before, Kate didn’t want to answer. But, unlike Porter, whom she felt she could easily distract, she knew there was no way she could deflect Michael’s question. At best, she could limit the information she gave him.

“I’m from the year 2009.” She said morosely, as if she were a prisoner of war spilling vital information after a session of water boarding torture.

“Holy shit!” Porter said enthusiastically. “Remind me to ask you who won the World Series or the Super Bowl so I can place a couple of bets when I get back home!”

“I don’t follow sports.” Kate said. “But I heard the Red Sox won the World Series a couple of times.”

“Holy shit!” Porter said, even more excited and surprised than before. “I’m gonna be rich!”

“Knock it off.” Michael said coldly. “Can you tell us anything important?”

“Well,” Kate said, choosing her words wisely. “The President of the United States is black.”

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“I’m still more surprised the Red Sox won.” Porter said jokingly.

“No,” Michael said, ignoring him. “Can you tell us something about us? Something that would indicate how we may have gotten out of this when?”

Kate knew he wanted her to tell him he was a famous author. Although she didn’t know how she knew that, she knew it was what he expected to hear. Just as she had inexplicably but instinctively felt some connection to *The Open Door* before she had even started reading it, she now felt that same sixth sense starting to kick in. Michael wasn’t telling them everything he knew. Not by a long shot.

“No.” Kate said, her nerves increasing along with her doubt of Michael and his intentions. “I hadn’t heard from or about you guys in years. Not since my dad was posted to the military base up north. Just after Porter and his family moved. The summer Vic went missing. The summer we performed the ritual.”

Michael looked at Porter once again, wondering what the man may or may not have already told Kate about their situation, worrying about how much he might have already fucked things up.

“She figured that out on her own.” Porter said without needing Michael to verbally accuse him of anything.

“I haven’t figured anything out.” Kate said, although the bits and pieces were starting to form a shocking whole in her mind.

“Good.” Michael said, forcing a false smile on his face. Instead of Dr. Faustus, Kate now thought of Brutus and the eventual bloody fate that befell Caesar. “What I mean is it’s good Porter didn’t confuse you. I’ve been here a long time, 20 years if what you said is true, and I think I’ve been able to figure most of it out. If Porter had tried to explain it to you, well, he probably would have just screwed it up. No offense, Porter, but look at yourself. A whole deserted town of department stores to choose from and you choose to wear that.”



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“Hey,” Porter said, looking down at the novelty t-shirt and faded blue jeans. “I’ve never been one for fads; that’s why I’m hopelessly out of fashion.”

“Regardless,” Michael went on, never taking his eyes off of Kate. “I think it best that I inform young Kate here of what’s actually going on. That does seem weird, doesn’t it? Me calling you young? Well, you are a couple years my junior, even if it appears otherwise now. Just another one of the ways this place and time screws with you.”

“What exactly is this place?” Kate asked, mentally fortifying herself to take everything Michael said with a truckload of salt. He was trying to come off as some benevolent benefactor when, Kate knew, he was nothing more than a greasy salesman trying to sell her a bag of magic beans. “What are we supposed to be doing here?”

“Maybe you’ll better understand after you hear my story.” Michael said, leading her to a sofa where there once stood a rack of beef jerky. “I make no apologies for what I’m about to tell you. I’m sure, if Porter told you his story, it was with puppy dog eyes and a heavy heart, begging forgiveness. I won’t be as pitiful. I killed the kid; I don’t deny it. That was in the summer of ’89. But, as you’ve already deduced, my tale really begins in 1984.”

### *Michael’s Story*

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The financial difference between the Brooks and the Johnson households was vast. Reggie Brooks worked at the local steel plant and earned a blue-collar paycheck. Porter Johnson’s father made enough to actually own the plant. But even though 6 figures a year separated the two clans, they still lived only two blocks away from one another, Reggie living beyond his means and the Johnson’s, in many people’s eyes, slumming it.

The two boys met on the bus ride into school the first day of the fourth grade and had remained friends through high school, until the events of the summer of 1984 drove the Johnson’s out of town. Porter could be a

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friend with anyone and Michael, although he'd never admit it, was Porter's friend because he had all of the cool shit – the latest toys, video games and anything else that his father's money could buy. He even had his own trampoline in the Johnson's backyard.

While Michael was still in high school, due to cheap foreign imports, the steel plant downsized and a number of the long-term employees were laid-off. Reggie Brooks was one of them, and although the drastic changes were made because on an influx of foreign automobiles on the domestic market, he felt it had more to do with the foreigners themselves who were every year invading America like swarms of cockroaches. Although there was no indication that the owners of the plant ever hired immigrant workers at a reduced salary to replace the 'lifers' they had been forced for economic reasons to let go, Reggie was adamant until the day of his death that he'd lost his job to some spic, wetback, chink or nigger. If he had bothered to look into the situation rather than just staying at home and collecting his severance pay and then the welfare checks from the government, he'd have discovered no one took his job. Unless, of course, you wanted to count the men who hadn't been let go but were forced to work twice as hard with no raise in pay. And of those, most of them would be replaced in a number of years by more efficient, sophisticated machines from Japan.

The severance package was 70% of his normal salary and was paid out for six months. The welfare checks that came thereafter were far less. They eventually had to sell their home and move into a cheap apartment across town. But \_\_\_\_\_ was a small town and the move didn't place Michael into a separate school district. He continued going to classes with Porter and they remained friends, even though the financial differences between them had widened even further than they had been before. Michael had to keep most of his father's colorful terms for people of differing ethnicities out of his daily vocabulary, but inside he was starting to share his father's racist views, as if

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by osmosis, being subjected to them every waking minute of every day.

Even though they had sold the house and their cost of living expenses decreased marginally, Reggie's drinking increased exponentially, as did his periods of aggressive behavior. He never hit anyone, but was often verbally abusive to those in the Brooks' household. Fearing for her safety, Michael's mom fled with his baby brother and moved in with her sister two towns over. Reggie didn't care. For him it just meant two less mouths to feed. Michael elected to stay with his dad as he and Reggie got along well with one another. They saw things eye-to-racist-eye. His dad didn't give a shit either way.

That summer, after an increase in rent led to a vicious shouting match between Reggie and the landlord, but nothing further, Reggie decided to hold a yard sale to make some extra cash. It would go towards the rent increase, yes, but also to fill the cooler in the fridge that was running dangerously low. Not one to often get out of the Lay-Z-Boy recliner in the living room for anything, he ordered his son and drafted his fat friend Porter, whom he always referred to as 'Porker', to go to the storage room in the basement of the building and drag up all of the boxes they had taken with them from the attic of their old house before moving.

That Saturday afternoon, Michael Brooks discovered the book of the Occult that would forever change their lives, and in poor Vic's case, end his.

The boxes in the basement were in the far corner, marked 'Broks' in Reggie's illiterate scrawl, and amounted to eight in total. Michael discovered the book in the third box he was rummaging through. He had never seen it before in his life, and he wondered where it came from. Certainly his parent's hadn't purchased it. Perhaps it had belonged to the pervious owners of the house they had been forced to vacate. Or maybe someone in the apartment complex decided to shove it in one of the Brooks' boxes rather than dispose of it properly. Either way, when he and Porter began bringing stuff up for the yard sale, the book went into his room instead of with the

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rest of the junk for sale. Although his father rarely ever entered his room, Michael hid it under the mattress of his bed to avoid detection nonetheless, as if it was one of the nudie mags he and his friends had found one summer.

The following weekend, after the yard sale and after having had a week to study the dusty tome, Michael brought together a group of friends to enact one of his particularly favorite passages. Well, friends and that scrawny chick, Kate, because he could find no one else and the ritual he planned on performing required four people.

They met at midnight at the gazebo in the park, just as he had instructed them to. Michael had no problem getting out of the house; his father having passed out after making his way through more than a third of the case of the *Pabst Blue Ribbon* purchased with money made at the yard sale. Michael arrived an hour before his friends, long after the last of the park visitors had retired for the night, but early enough to set the stage according to the details outlined in the book. He began by painting a large pentagram on the floor of the gazebo. The ritual called for goat's blood, but the closest he could come to that was red paint purchased at the local hardware store earlier in the week. After the pentagram had been laid out, he drew cryptic symbols around it, much like those adorning the covers of his *Led Zeppelin* records. He then placed candles at the 5 tips of the inverted star. As with the paint, Michael came as close as he could to meeting the requirements, using dark blue candles because black ones were only to be found in town come the Halloween season. He placed the remaining candles from the box of a dozen around the edges of the sinister diagram on the floor to better illuminate the forthcoming proceedings. He didn't set them on the railings because he wanted to avoid any unwanted attention from a possible late night passerby. Using his father's Zippo, he lit them all and waited patiently for his friends to arrive.

Vic and Porter came together, Kate late and on her own. Vic scoffed at the idea after looking through the book, wondering how evil a ritual could be if it was from a book published by *Random House* in 1977. Porter reminded

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him that the Ouija board Vic owned and insisted they play all the time, trying to contact the recently ventilated soul of John Lennon, was made by Parker Brothers. Frustrated, Michael told them all to shut up, even Kate, who hadn't said a single word since arriving.

They gathered around the circle, Michael holding the book Vic had ridiculed. Although he had read and reread the paragraph so many times in the past week to have it memorized, he flipped to the appropriate page just in case. He instructed those gathered to hold hands and close their eyes while he recited the dark incantation. They complied, and Michael began to call upon the elder Gods, the demons and spirits that inhabited the world just beyond ours. He invoked the damned trapped in the ninth ring, demanding of them the creation of a door linking our world to theirs. His voice rose as if in a Pentecostal fervor. He shook his fist at the heavens, demanding our God to try and stop him from calling upon these others. He threw aside the book and removed a sharp blade to slash open the palm of his own hand. Flinging his hand forward, blood splattered the painted floorboards of the gazebo. His friends, their eyes still closed, did not see this serious turn of events. The candles began to sway, their flames flickering in the non-existent wind. As he stretched out his blood-smeared hand, Michael's eyes rolled back in their sockets, revealing all white. Then, in a deep voice not his own, as if he were being high jacked by something from the beyond, he began to speak the final words needed to complete the ritual. No one noticed how the sky had begun to cloud over and thunderclaps started to boom in the west.

As Michael paused to catch his breath, Porter farted and Vic laughed out loud, letting go of the flatulent boy's hand to move a few feet away.

"Aw, man, that's fucking rank!" Vic said, exaggeratingly pinching his nose shut. "What'd ya have for dinner? A bag of old eggs?"

"Bow before my mighty anus!" Porter said, laughing as well. "Holy shit, is that blood?"

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The circle - and the spell - had been broken. Perhaps irrevocably. Michael was determined to try again, however, even if he had to threaten or beg the others to take things more seriously. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but the desire to perform the ritual had become an unrelenting urgency. It was no longer a fun way to pass an evening, but a matter of life and death. Whose death, though, he was no longer certain. But he knew they had started something, and if it weren't finished properly, they would all have to pay. For the first time in his young life, Michael Brooks feared for his mortal soul.

Before he could cajole them back into participating, a bright light shined upon their faces, blinding them. The disembodied voice that accompanied it, no doubt that of a police officer, demanded to know what they were up to. Even though they could hardly see, the four kids ran from the gazebo, away from the idling cop car and into the woods that bordered the backside of the park. The officer didn't bother to chase them down, but they ran for a long length of time anyway. When they finally stopped, clear of the woods and in the parking lot of the Orinco station Michael Brooks would one day reside in, he told them they had to go back.

"Fuck that." Porter said, clutching his side, breathing heavily. "Last thing I need is to have the cops bring me home."

"Yeah." Vic repeated. "I can't get into no more trouble. I'll be grounded the rest of the summer for sure."

"Maybe later." Porter said. "Next week, after the heat's died down a bit. Okay, Mikey? I really think we should just call it a night."

"Kate?" Michael said, forced to address her for the first time, desperate to find even a single ally amongst the larger number of dissenters.

"I don't know." She said, afraid to take anyone's side. "But if you guys want...."

"Fuck that." Vic said. "I'm going home. Later skaters. We can finish this next weekend if you want to, Mike. For now, count me out. I'm bushed."

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There was nothing Michael could do to convince them to stay. He could only hope that postponing the completion of the ritual one more week wouldn't have catastrophic consequences. Little did he know that he'd end up postponing it for another quarter century. Vic went missing the following Wednesday, and soon thereafter, Porter was afraid to leave his house even for school, let alone to venture out after dark. Kate, as always, would have been willing to go along with Michael's plans, but without all four of them it was doomed to fail. By the next weekend, a town drunkard serving his community service had cleaned the gazebo, removing any signs of what they had done. Then Porter moved, and shortly thereafter Kate's father was posted to a new base, and he dragged his family with him up north.

Michael concerned himself with the events of that night for a few more months before the lure of cars and girls pushed thoughts of the unfinished ritual from his mind. He became less worried about what they might have unleashed unchecked and more interested in sex, drugs and - if not quite rock and roll - 80's new wave. He didn't leave town for college or university after graduating from high school, but stayed and took the job at the Orinco gas station where, that night 5 years previously, he had tried to convince his friends to go back to the park.

Five years after the fact, the events from that night finally caught up with Michael Brooks when Darnell Scott walked into the gas station at precisely 12 o'clock midnight.

He was a freshman at the high school and made mediocre grades. He got into trouble as often as he stayed out of it. He had a few good friends and a number of acquaintances. He had no immediate plans for the future, but a variety of options. He was, to put it simply, average. But he was black. And on this night, he was definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Darnell parked his father's car at the pumps, unscrewed the gas cap and began filling the tank with regular. He strolled across the macadam lot and entered the gas station. The jingling of the bells hanging over the

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door announced to the attendant on duty that a customer had come in. Michael had been straightening the coolers in the back of the store, heard the bell and made his way to the front to serve whoever had just entered.

The bell was a security measure, installed so people couldn't walk in while the clerk was out of site doing something at the back of the store, and make off with unpaid merchandise from the front. Michael wasn't overly concerned if some kid made off with a handful of jerky or a bag of potato chips. When he reached the front of the store, however, and saw the color of Darnell's skin, the flashy attire, the baseball cap turned sideways on an ebony head with some design or other shaved into the back of the skull, he wished he'd been up front the whole time to see what this creep had possibly already stuffed into his pockets.

"May I help you?" Michael asked as cordially as possible, the adrenaline starting to pump a little richer through his veins. He always got nervous when confronting a thief, not sure if the encounter would turn violent or not. And with people of color it almost always did. They were like animals when cornered, or so he believed.

"Naw, that's okay, man." Darnell said, smiling. His grin was too bright for the rest of his dark complexion. It made Michael even more nervous. "I'm just browsing while my tank fills is all."

Michael dared to take his eyes off of the punk for a brief second to corroborate his story. In the lot at pump no. 2, under the flickering fluorescent lights above it, sat a brand new, 1990 Ford Mustang. *There's no way that car belongs to this kid*, Michael thought. *Unless the bastard stole it.*

"Nice ride." Michael said, trying to keep his tone conversational. He was slowly inching his way to the front counter. When he got there, he slipped behind it and surreptitiously reached below.

"Thanks, man." Darnell said, also moving towards the counter. "It's my dad's car, but he let's me take it out on the weekends. It's a honey magnet, I tell ya."



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Darnell started to do a little dance, as if he had just made the game-winning touchdown. Michael saw it for what it was. He was trying to distract him or lull him into a state of friendly complacency. Then he would strike if Michael didn't strike first.

"What's it get to the gallon?" Michael asked, trying to keep the criminal talking until he felt the smooth sandalwood grip of the shotgun meet his probing palm.

"Shit, man, I don't know." Darnell said, raising his hands in ignorance. It was as if he already knew how this was going to end and he was surrendering. "Chicks don't care about stuff like that, dude. They just care about how fast it goes and how fly it looks. Ya know what I'm talking 'bout?"

Maybe it was because his hands were cold in the air conditioned room, or maybe he simply did not feel like letting them fall to his sides, but when Darnell lowered his hands he made the mistake of moving to put them into the front pockets of his coat. Michael regarded the movement as hostile, thinking the kid was going for a weapon, and pulled the shotgun out from being the counter, aiming it at the young man. Michael would come to think later, after having two decades to pontificate over this particular moment in time, that it wasn't dumb luck or casual innocence that guided Darnell to put his hands in his pockets there and then. It was whatever they had released from the partially opened door that night in the park. Feelers had finally tracked Michael down and sent this boy as their emissary, knowing how much Reggie Brooks had tainted his son's mind with racist propaganda. This was how they planned on tainting Michael with the evil he originally let loose that night.

"Jesus, man, what are ya doing?" Darnell said, raising his hands so fast and so high in the air as to be almost comical. "Why you pointing that gun at me, man?"

"Shut up!" Michael said. "Put your hands behind your head, lace your fingers together and turn around."

"But I..."

"Now!"

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Darnell complied, beginning to whimper as he did so. He was trembling violently, and when Michael stepped out from behind the counter to move a couple more steps towards him, he emitted a low groan.

“On your knees and then onto your stomach.” Michael commanded.

“Please, I didn’t do anything wrong.” Darnell said in between choking sobs.

“On your knees and onto your stomach!” Michael shouted again, nudging his captive in the back with the barrel of the shotgun.

Darnell complied reluctantly, slowly dropping to his knees before laying flat on his stomach. The tiled floor was cold and a stark reminder that he wasn’t dreaming.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I was gonna pay for it, I swear.” He began blubbering, his head turned slightly on the floor, his cheek starting to go numb.

“For the car?” Michael said. “You’re trying to tell me that you were going to pay for the car you stole? The car out there?”

“What?” Darnell said, confusion replacing the look of terror that had been plastered onto his face ever since Michael trained the shotgun on him. It lasted just for the briefest of seconds. “No, I told ya, that’s my daddy’s car. It’s my daddy’s.”

“Then what are you talking about? What were you going to pay for?”

“Here.” Darnell said, reaching for something in his coat pocket.

The gun in Michael Brooks’ hands seemed to go off on its own. The BOOM of the double barrels was near deafening in the confines of the small gas station. It seemed to bounce off of the walls forever. The kick from the weapon hurt Michael’s shoulder and almost knocked him off his feet. The acrid smoke that billowed from the hot barrels was blue and lingered in the air like that of a cheap cigar. When the sound and stench of the weapon had finally dissipated, the only indication that they had occurred, aside from the bruise that was already beginning to form on Michael’s shoulder, was the corpse of 16-year

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old Darnell Scott. A wound the size of a basketball had redecorated his back. There was amazingly very little blood for such a large, vicious wound, the arteries almost completely cauterized by the heat of the shells.

“Oh my God.” Michael whispered. Or at least he thought he had whispered, the sound of his own shaky voice barely registered on eardrums that were still ringing from the blast of the gun. “What have I done?”

But he knew what he’d done. He’d apprehended a crook. He was a hero. He stepped over the body, leaned down and fished through the pocket that Darnell had been reaching for. He was sure he’d locate a gun or some kind of weapon. Or maybe the wallet belonging to the guy he’d stolen the car from. Perhaps Michael hadn’t just apprehended a crook; perhaps he’d stopped a murderer as well.

Smiling triumphantly, Michael pulled the plastic package of beef jerky from Darnell’s coat pocket.

“Son of a bitch.” He mumbled to himself. “You were stealing a snack.”

*But, he thought, that didn’t explain the car out front.*

After the police had come and taken Michael to the stationhouse, the car out front *was* explained when Darnell Scott’s grieving father, there to identify the body of his only son, was able to identify it as his as well.

“Best get some sleep,” one of the cops told Michael as he locked the door to his cell. “Your court-appointed lawyer will be here first thing in the morning. Not sure what he’s gonna be able to do for you, though. A pack of jerky doesn’t quite warrant what ya did to that kid tonight. You’d best think of something and quick. Fucking niggers.”

Michael looked up just as the officer walked out of sight. The cop could have been racist before, but Michael had the feeling that whatever it was that had sent him over the edge, whatever pushed him past simply parroting his father’s hateful mantras to shooting an innocent kid, had just passed from him to his jailer. It was the only explanation he could think of, because the officer had been African American. He could think of no other reason for a

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man of color to use such a hateful slur. Alone in his cell that night, he began the process of puzzling out what exactly had happened in the park five years ago and how it was still happening to him. Was it happening to the others as well? Was it spreading?

In the morning, when his lawyer arrived from city hall, she discovered Michael Brooks' cell completely and inexplicably empty.

### **The Present Past, One Last Time**

"When I awoke, I was alone and in the gazebo." Michael said, finishing his tale. "As you know, nothing ever changes in this Godforsaken town. At first I thought I had just fallen asleep in my prison cell and woke up a free man. I assumed the guard must have facilitated my escape in the night, although I couldn't explain why. Just because he'd referred to black people the way he did didn't mean he was sympathetic to my plight. Or at the very least willing to put his career and own freedom on the line for me. Plus, why hadn't I woken up? No, the more I thought about it, the more I realized no one of this world had set me free. Over time I came to understand just how *free* I actually was. I discovered that it was no longer 1989; that I had somehow traveled five years into the past. The town was deserted. I couldn't pass its boundaries. Nothing worked and I thought I was going to starve or go mad. But soon I was able to figure things out. Now, after 20 long years, my time in this purgatory is near an end. Our time. So you'll have to forgive me if I'm being rather rude or curt, Kate. I'm just very anxious to get on with my life. Whatever prison time I may have deserved for killing that boy, I've more than served it here."

Kate had sat listening, and when Michael came to an end, felt about as bad for him as she had for Porter. Which was to say not at all. These people disgusted her. But she would need them if she were to make it out of there. She realized that, although she listened to Michael's entire Canterbury-like tale, it hadn't really explained anything. She was as in the dark as she had been after

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listening to Porter's own story. *The best way to ensure allegiance*, her father had always said, *was to keep the troops in the dark. Give the men only what they need to know to fulfill their mission, nothing more.* Although Porter had not been forthcoming with any of the details she had requested of him, Kate felt that was due more to his ignorance of the facts than anything else. Where Michael was concerned, however, his evasiveness seemed to stem from some other motive.

"I'm still fuzzy on a few of the details." Kate said, not giving a shit if that upset him or not. If he didn't need her help he wouldn't have given a shit if she were dead. Kate felt the small twitch of a smile raise the corner of her mouth and wondered where this newfound sense of self had come from. She liked the new *her*. "I mean, you told us how you got here, and I can understand why you can't really know the machinations of what made that possible, but how were you able to figure things out on your own? What exactly is it that we have to do to get out of here and how do you know it'll work?"

"Well, well, well," Michael said, somewhat sarcastically. "This isn't the Kate I used to know so well. You were always on board with whatever anyone suggested, no questions asked. I'm impressed."

He wasn't impressed. He was annoyed. He needed everyone's absolute complicity for whatever he had in mind to work, and for the moment that meant Kate had the upper hand. He would only placate her for as long as she was necessary, though, so she best make use of the fact now.

"Thanks." Kate said, lacking a better retort to his sarcasm. "What about the people of our past? I guess for you it's that Darnell Scott boy. What about those specters? Why are they here?"

Michael shot Porter a stare that could easily kill a man. Porter almost deflated under its power and slid off the table he had been sitting on. Claiming he needed a smoke, he stepped out of the gas station. Michael turned his attention back to Kate, the harsh look on his face replaced with a false look of sympathy for her.

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“I suppose it’s better that we’re alone for this last part.” He said conspiratorially, as if he thought should Kate be given the impression he was imparting to her some special bit of wisdom reserved only for someone special, she’d melt and fall under his sway like an infatuated schoolgirl. “I was hoping you wouldn’t see your own demon from the past. That’s why Porter and I would take turns waiting for you. He was off watching *Indiana Jones* again, wasn’t he? I don’t think he fully grasps the seriousness of this situation. He can be such a spoiled child.”

Kate almost felt like reminding Michael that he was the same age as Porter, but didn’t. Perhaps living in this when could be measured in dog years, giving Michael a leg up on all of them.

“I didn’t want you to have to see that.” Michael continued. “I didn’t want you to be frightened the way Porter and I had been. Those things, those remnants of our past, are here to stop us, I’m sure of it. We set something loose when we performed the ritual in the park. Something that left us marked like cattle ever since. It has been searching for us, and now that it has found you, finally trapped us all. I’m sure if your family hadn’t moved you would have been caught years ago, maybe even before me. If you hadn’t moved further away than Porter had, you would have been brought back before him. It’s like a ripple in a pond, spreading out from the center like an evil, black wave. The things that are with us now are the results of that evil. They’re here to stop us. They’re here to stop us from closing the door we opened.”

“But why haven’t they already?” Kate asked.

“Perhaps they couldn’t until we were all here?” Michael answered, his words sounding such like a question on a page in one of his stories she could actually envision the telltale question mark.

*Liar*, Kate thought. If those things wanted to stop us they would. For some reason Michael wasn’t telling her, they couldn’t or didn’t want to. But as sure of that as she was, she still felt if Tom appeared now in his ghastly form

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she'd be no match for him. She never had been. If he was here too, he meant nothing but harm for her.

"We're going back to the gazebo." Michael said. "We're going to perform the ritual and put an end to the evil we started so many years ago. We're going to close the door."

Although Kate didn't trust him, she had no alternative. She told herself she wasn't yet again going along blindly, but that, regardless of the deception she felt radiating off of him, Michael Brooks' plan might work. It may actually be why they had all been brought back. Resigning herself to go along for the time being, Kate took Michael's hand as he offered it to her, and let him lead her out of the gas station toward her inevitable destiny.

Porter was leaning against one of the useless pumps, smoking what could have been his second or third cigarette since he had left them alone. He watched as Michael brushed past him quickly, simply uttering 'Let's go', seeming to let the matter of Porter's failure to meet Kate at the gazebo drop. Porter smiled and breathed a sigh of relief, tossing the butt between his fingers away while sidling over to Kate's side.

"He was pissed, wasn't he?" He asked, trying to keep his voice low.

"I don't know." Kate said. "I don't think he cares all too much as long as we go along with this plan of his."

"Good." Porter said. "I was worried he was going to leave me behind."

"I don't think he can leave any of us behind." Kate said, mentally sifting through all of the information she had been given so far, cataloguing it, regardless of what she felt about its veracity.

"Well," Porter continued. "I can see why he's in such a rush. 20 years? Shit, that's a long time to have been sitting around here writing stories. Not that they aren't any good, mind you. He'd read them to me on a number of occasions, saying a writer really isn't a writer unless he has an audience. Stories about diaries that tell the future, monsters that devour mobsters, cannibal hillbillies, crazy

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shit like that. He's working on a screenplay right now called Cut 'Em Up."

"Slice N' Dice." Michael said from up ahead of them, not turning back even as he corrected Porter.

"Yeah, that's it." Porter said. "Gruesome stuff."

Kate was worried that Michael was obviously listening in on her and Porter's conversation. It could have been because, in this dead world, sound traveled and he had no choice in the matter, but she felt it was more likely because he didn't trust the two of them. Their objective, to get back to when this all began, was the same, so why he felt the need to be so distrustful intensified Kate's same feeling towards him. And she was running out of time. In a world where time seemed to have come to a stop altogether, that thought would have been amusing if the circumstances weren't so dire. It seemed to her as if they were making record time getting to the gazebo, and she still had no idea what to do when she got there. Having Porter chatter in her ear about Michael's writing like some enthused fan boy wasn't helping, either. Even though they were starting to lure a memory to the surface of her mind, of something she saw but didn't quite comprehend when she had first arrived but was now of great importance, they also kept her from being able to reach the penultimate goal of remembrance. She tried to focus on her own thoughts but found it difficult as Porter kept talking. That and the fact that she was almost sure they were being trailed by three figures just past the periphery of her vision.

"Ya see why he's so intent on getting home?" Porter rambled. "Shit load of good a screenplay will do ya if there's no way you can ever have it made."

"Yes, I agree." Kate said, not caring but wanting to give the impression that she was involved in this innocuous conversation rather than mentally trying to uncover Michael's true motives. He was obviously listening, and aside from the arrogant pride most authors take in hearing other people talk about their work, she knew he was listening instead for signs of any potential betrayal.



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Michael was walking faster than the two behind him and had a decent, half-block lead. He was the first to spy the gazebo in the center of the town and the first to see that it was not unattended. As this was his plan, *his* lack of surprise came as no surprise to Kate. If anything, the arrival of Victor Tomlinson explained things better than Michael heretofore had been willing to do. If Michael had arrived 5 years after the ritual, and Porter and Kate had been 15 and then 25 years in the coming, it made sense that Vic represented year zero. Also, if Michael were to have actually figured out what it was they were all doing here and how it was that they were to get free, he needed to have made contact with someone on the inside. After getting a good look at Vic and his ragged state, it was clear he had been to places where that knowledge could be attained.

He stood in the center of the gazebo, looking almost just as he did when they were kids. He was 15-years old and quite dead. His skin was mottled gray and covered with blisters and open, puss-weeping sores. His eyes were milky white, lacking any pupils or irises. His hair was a patchwork of tufts and bunches. A stitched up wound ran from the top of his skull, down his forehead and face, curving around the nose so that organ remained intact on the right side of his death mask, before disappearing below the neckline of his t-shirt. Kate instinctively knew the wound ran down the length of his torso and into his crotch, where it continued up his back to connect with the top of the skull. Vic had been ripped in two and crudely sewn back together again. Kate couldn't help but compare him to the *Raggedy Andy* doll she had had as a girl. Vic was the hellish thing come to life.

He turned and smiled to them as they arrived. When he spoke, his voice was gravely and Kate could see his green tongue just beyond a row of yellow, cracked teeth.

"Isn't this a fucked up reunion or what?"

Michael ignored him, walking up the steps and into the gazebo to make sure everything had been set up exactly. Porter ran forward and began pumping Vic's hand

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as if he were Bob Barker and Porter had just got called up onto the stage of *The Price is Right*. The sound of Vic's joints fighting the rigor mortis that had set in so long ago sounded like someone twisting dried leather.

"Man" Porter said to Vic jovially. "You look like shit!"

"And you got fat. Pardon me, I mean *fatter*." Vic replied, laughing. As the skin stretched around the grinning mouth it made the same ghoulis sound the rhythmic pumping of his arm had.

Kate ignored them, and like it had always been in the past, they ignored her. She had been hoping Michael would have to prepare things when they arrived, giving her more time to think things through, but the stage was set and they would begin at any moment. Vic's handiwork, obviously. So at least someone was keeping an eye on the place and knew when Kate had arrived.

The three figures she had sensed following them on the way were now converging on the park, and although no one else had noticed them yet, it would only be a matter of minutes before they did. She could see the flattened head of Barry Saunders and peer through the hole in the chest of Darnell Scott. She couldn't make out the third one yet, but even though it's shape and size didn't match that of Tom Patterson, she still feared it was her abusive ex-husband anyway. She so badly didn't want to find out she almost felt like alerting the others to their presence, which would have no doubt lead to their immediately getting underway. Kate held her breath, closed her eyes and counted back from 10, a trick she had taught herself to help calm her nerves when she sensed Tom was slipping into one of his moods.

She opened her eyes, and although the things were still out there, encircling them, she felt more relaxed. The exercise was never meant to make them disappear, but to be able to think straight under the potential threat of their slow but steady advancement. She had but a matter of moments before she would have to make a decision. She didn't know what the right thing to do was. A large part of her yearned for the return of the old Kate, where no

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decision-making was required. The decision was already made; she just needed to follow along. It was Michael's decision. Thinking of the man led her to look at him and looking at him led her to realize the vital clue that had been skimming across the surface of her consciousness the whole way there.

He was standing in the center of the gazebo, going through the old book of the Occult that had been found amongst the stuff from the attic so many years ago. Michael and his book. Michael's book. And then Kate recalled what she had partially glimpsed, but failed to comprehend, when she first arrived back here. It had been when she was leaving the park. She had caught a glimpse of something under a hedge near the gazebo. Something she had ignored then, but now realized was her copy of *The Open Door*, somehow transported back with her.

*That's it*, Kate thought to herself. *The answers I need are in there.*

Moving cautiously, like a shoplifter in a store who was sure everyone knew what she was up to, Kate made her way towards the gazebo. Porter and Vic were talking a few feet away, and although Vic lacked the pupils and irises needed to see, she still felt as if he was tracking her progress. When she reached the gazebo, she moved into such a position that Porter's large bulk was between her and Vic's line of sight. She crouched down, and without looking back, began sweeping the ground with her hand in search of the paperback. She couldn't locate it at first and started to worry it might no longer be there. Her heart was racing and she was just about to give up, knowing that someone was bound to take notice of her soon, when she felt the corner of it with the tips of her fingers. She snatched it off of the cold earth, hid it behind her back just as she had hid it from her roommate, and slowly backed away from the others. She was able to dart behind a bush unnoticed, and quickly opened the book, ignoring her own rule and flipping through the pages to the end.

She had only made it so far while in the tub back home, not even half way through, and now discovered that, while the first portion dealt with them as kids back in

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1984, the rest of the story dealt with them as they were now. Brought back from their respective time periods not to close the door, as Michael had lied to her, but to finish opening it.

There was a sudden flash of blinding light as Kate read the words. She was no longer staring at the letters on the page but actually viewing the things they described as if it were unraveling before her like a film. A film that she found herself actually in, but like Ebenezer and his journey through life with the Christmas spirits, one she couldn't interact with and that failed to take note of her presence.

She was standing at the foot of the gazebo, looking up and watching Michael awake from his time into this one. Even though he had told them otherwise, when he awoke he wasn't alone. Vic was sitting on the edge of the gazebo, waiting for him the way Porter had been supposed to be waiting for her.

"Wakey, wakey," Vic said in his gravelly voice. "Daylight in the swamp."

Michael was confused, startled and hesitant to believe what Vic was telling him at first. But, for a lack of any other explanation, he eventually began to trust his old friend. When Darnell Scott showed up, stepping past Kate without acknowledging that she was there, Michael made to run before Vic halted his terrified escape. Darnell was waving his hands as if he were trying to ward off an oncoming vehicle from driving into a ditch or sink hole. He was speaking, but no sound came from his mouth. Vic waved his hand as if dismissing a foolish idea and the specter of Darnell vanished instantly.

"Don't worry about him," Vic said. "He has no power here. He wants to warn you away from what I am about to propose. He wants to stop you from making a mistake. And a mistake it may be, but one that can still have great benefits for you."

"I don't understand," Michael said, still shaken up by the sudden appearance of Darnell, but willing to listen to Vic's idea since he had power over the apparition.

"Five years ago we started opening a door. We never finished. On the other side of that door is an evil

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just dying to be let loose onto our world. It found me quickly enough and did to me what you now see. I've been trapped with them ever since, and I want out. You were easy to locate because you never left. We need to find the others, Porter and Kate, and bring them here as well. Together we need to finish what we started and open the door the rest of the way. Then we can all be free."

"But won't that be unleashing evil?" Michael asked. It would be the first and only time his moral compass would spin. "Shouldn't we close it?"

"I've been here for five years. I don't want it closed. You'll be here for an eternity if we don't open it. Trust me; it won't take long for you to come to my side of thinking on this. They call this place the ninth ring. You'll call it hell. I've spoken to... people here and there's a way we can make this worth your while. You would cease to have any moral compunction about this over time on your own anyway, but we're sick of waiting and need things taken care of now. There's a thing here that can sweeten the deal. It's a Djinn. A genie. Stupid creature, always getting trapped and needing to be freed. They're the ostriches of the other side. The one here now will grant your greatest desire if you do this for us."

"What do I need to do?" Michael asked.

"Convince the others once we locate and bring them here. I don't know when that will be, but you must be ready for them. Convince them that we'll be closing the door. Convince them that apparitions like Darnell are dangerous and want to stop them from going home. Convince them to follow you."

"Why can't we just finish opening the door ourselves?"

"No. Four began the process; those same four must complete it. Should the ritual be attempted without all, those who try will be destroyed."

"And what about after it's done? You're telling me I'll be returned to a world consumed by evil. Why would I want to do that?"

"Evil is patient, my friend." Vic explained. "It's more fun that way. You will be long dead by the time it

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finally reigns. And the life you will have led will be a prosperous and envied one.”

Kate watched as Michael sat in silence thinking over the proposition. She wasn't sure how much of what Vic told him was the truth. Surely evil wasn't patient. Patience was a virtue, or so she had been told. But that the specters were there to warn them off and do them no harm? Tom Patterson had never done anything *but* harm to Kate while in life, and she was unconvinced that he'd do otherwise now. But then there was the reward that Vic spoke of. In her time, Michael Brooks was a celebrated, successful author, no doubt the result of this backdoor deal. And if that deal had come to fruition in her time, didn't that mean Michael was successful in this one? Didn't that mean she had already made up her mind to follow along once again? The paradox was starting to hurt her brain. She looked up, and already knowing how Michael was going to answer, wasn't surprised to see him mouth the word 'Okay'.

But when he did, Kate heard him calling her name instead. When he called it again, she blinked her eyes and found that she was no longer in the world of that past but in this one. The book she had been reading was no longer in her hands. Hands she now noticed were trembling violently.

“There you are.” Michael said, stepping around the bush that had previously been concealing her. “We're ready.”

He led her up the steps of the gazebo where Vic and Porter were already waiting. The candles had been lit and the book of the Occult was open to the appropriate passage. Michael told them to take their positions, but she failed to move. In a world where time had already stopped, it felt to her as if it were stopping again. The fabric of her surroundings seemed to tear open, revealing a horrid vista of the world just beyond ours to which they were about to open a door.

She saw a large body of water, shimmering with a multitude of varying, reflective colors. At one moment it was a dark blue, then purple and then a deep red. At its

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end was a rocky coastline. Sharp, jagged crags sprouted forth and the sea foamed around their bases. In the distance was a mountain range, silhouetted against an orange, lightening scarred sky. A tower resembling a lighthouse stood there, more of a guard tower than a beacon for ships caught in a storm. Creatures resembling hammerhead sharks swarm in the waters, staring at her with human eyes. Monsters cavorted on the beaches as if awaiting her and her friends' arrival with the bridge between worlds. A thing that was a bulbous mass covered with eyes and skittering legs tested the waters. Diminutive creatures scurried in and out of the legs of a larger, horned beast with barbed genitalia. Nowhere could Kate find a trace of anything human or decent or pure. She had no doubt that these monsters were just as easily seeing her world as she was theirs. She felt like a Native on the shore watching as the first of the European settlers' boats arrived. She knew that if these things were to make it into our world, humanity would suffer the same fate those poor bastards who were here before Columbus had.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, Kate turned her head away and found herself staring at the pentagram and other cabalistic designs painted on the floor of the gazebo. Michael hadn't started his recitations yet. They were all waiting on her. And she knew that if she were to walk away now they would try it without her and be lost. But she also knew that she had gone along before. Michael's success in her time was proof of that. How many times had she stood here before? A hundred? A million? An infinite amount of times? Was she destined to keep recycling this scene for the rest of time eternal, or would the evil they were about to unleash destroy everything and bring an eventual end to this oft-repeated farce?

Kate couldn't think straight. She felt as if she was about to faint or vomit or both. She was dizzy and worried she was about to topple over. Knowing that she no doubt had gone along with this before left her feeling inclined to just go along with it again. It would be easier than trying to figure out a new course of action. Looking away from the others in a hope to clear her head and shake off the sense

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of vertigo that was assaulting it, she saw the three figures standing in a semi-circle around the gazebo.

They all had forlorn looks upon their features as if they too had been cast in this play countless times before, their hopes for a different outcome with this particular performance about to be dashed once again. Kate looked at Darnell Scott and Barry Saunders and saw the sadness in their eyes. Well, in Darnell's at least, as Barry's eyes had been swept away in a rain gutter long ago, leaving him nothing but empty sockets. She could still feel his anguish nonetheless.

Standing next to them, taking her by surprise more than anything else had yet, was the specter of the evil perpetrated in her life. It wasn't, as she had thought it would be, Tom. It was herself. Her eyes were blackened. Her nose was broken. The dried blood coating her cheeks looked like macabre rouge. This was what she had looked like the night Tom beat her and pushed her down the cellar stairs. The evil that Michael and Porter had done had been on others. The evil she had permitted was in allowing herself to be the victim for so long.

Kate looked back at Michael, Porter and Vic. They were all watching her expectantly. As she stood there, poised between going along with them yet again and not, she remembered the words that had been running through her head the last time Tom attacked her. The ghost of herself on the grass in the park reminded her.

Was warning her.

*Never again.*

"Well, Kate?" Michael asked. "Are you ready?"

*Never again.*

"Yeah, Kate," Porter chimed in. "Let's get this show on the road."

*Never again.*

"Kate," Vic said, his voice sounding like dirt. "This is the only way."

*Never again.*



## **The Present Now**

### *Kate's Story*

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Kate Waters-Murphy checks her email one last time, discovers no new messages and shuts down the computer. The same goes for voice mail. Most of the people who work at the agency have already left and she is now free to flee as well. She takes her time straightening up her desk, making sure there are no neglected post-it notes with some task or other that needs her immediate attention before leaving for the weekend. Everything looks good, and after quickly poking her head in Ms. McDonald's office to get the official all clear, she slings her purse over her shoulder, closes the door to the staffing agency behind her and leaves.

**THE END**

## **Epilogue: 'Just Before Dawn'**

Stan has no real idea when Alice actually fell asleep, but as he comes to the end of the book he looks down and sees that, unlike the last time, she is now truly out like a light. He folds up the metal chair he has been sitting on for the past few hours, and as he moves, his butt, previously numbed into its own state of catatonia, tingles as it begins to awaken. The feeling makes him want to giggle. He places the book back in Alice's secret hiding space and leans over to give his daughter a light kiss on the forehead. She mumbles in her sleep and smiles beatifically.

"Goodnight, angel." Stan whispers. He shuts off her light and quietly steps out of her room.

He enters his own to find Anne out as well. She had turned the lamp resting on the nightstand on her side of the bed off to get some sleep, but considerably turned the one next to his on. This way he still has some light to help avoid receiving a stubbed toe. The digital clock next to his own lamp tells him that it's just before dawn. Peeking past the bedroom curtains, he can make out the light beginning to creep back into the world on the eastern horizon.

He can hardly believe he had been reading to Alice for so long. He wonders just which tale it was that she fell asleep listening to.

"Well, no time like the present." He whispers to himself, leaving the room after he shuts his own lamp off to give Anne complete darkness for a few more hours of sleep. He contemplates joining her, but with it being so late, or actually rather so early, he figures he might as well get to work on some of the household chores he has been putting off for so long now.

He decides to start with the storm windows in the basement, and stops in the kitchen on his way. He grabs a cold bottle of water from the fridge and slips on a pair of slippers as he expects the floor downstairs to be cold.

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Making his way, he thinks of the scary stories he just read Alice and wonders why kids love them so much. Stories of giant ants, vampires, mobster eating monsters and things with hungry tentacles riding the bus. It's like she just can't get enough of them. He remembers feeling that same way as a kid, and although he's sure she would vehemently deny it, guesses that even Anne got a thrill or two out of them when she was younger too. Realizing that he stayed up most of the night reading them, probably well past the point when Alice had actually fallen asleep, makes him realize he hasn't quite outgrown them after all.

Stepping into the cellar, he eyes the storm window requiring his attention and sets the water bottle on a nearby ledge. His tools are in the other room with the washer and dryer and he goes to get them. Pulling the string dangling overhead to turn on the single, dusty bulb attached to the crossbeam in the center of the room, Stan finds his attention inexplicably drawn to the corner.

The concrete wall is somewhat cracked and dirty, but otherwise as it should be. But something gnawing at the back of his brain tells him there was once something there that is now gone. Something that was, but now never was, there before. He can't shake the feeling that whatever it had been was dangerous and he and his family had just narrowly dodged a figurative bullet.

Stan gives his head a shake, trying to drive the mysterious thought from his head. Perhaps that collection of short stories by Mike Morrison had gotten to him after all.

He grabs the toolbox and leaves the room, eager to get a start on the storm windows before moving on to the other projects still lined up. He wants the place to be in tip-top shape come the end of the month.

He plans on taking his daughter trick-or-treating for Halloween and doesn't want to have to worry about chores left undone.

## **Afterward: Notes on the Tales**

I've always been a fan of the Afterward, especially in anthologies. I'm interested in knowing what an author was thinking when crafting a particular work. This being my first book, I threw in everything I could conceivably think of (as long as it fit naturally into tales of the unnatural, that is) and I got my ideas and inspirations from damn near everywhere, not the least of which being to those dedicated at the opening of each piece. I thought it would be fun, and of interest to those interested, if I shared where, how and why they inspired and affected my work as they did. If you, the reader, don't care to know how the magician pulled off the trick, well, I understand. I hope you had a pleasant journey thus far and now bid you farewell and sweet dreams. For those of you who want to travel with me for a few more pages, or are a little too afraid to turn out the lights *just yet*, remain seated, we've almost come to the last stop.

**The Wraparound** – This was originally only supposed to consist of a *Prologue* that set up the stories in the book, but gained more importance when I decided it worked nicely as a prequel of sorts to the action that unfolds in *The Benefits of Smoking*. I liked adding a level of meta-fiction to a series of stories already intricately interconnected. The *Tales* in the collection represent the stories in the book Stan is reading to his daughter, Alice, while the stories themselves are actually happening in the 'real world'. Even though *The Open Door* ends on a rather vague note, the *Epilogue* is meant to suggest that sometimes '*never again*' really means never again, that there are such things as happy endings, even if they rarely reared their pretty heads throughout the book. And no, I don't think I'd be reading any of this stuff to my 7-year old daughter, either. Maybe when she turns eight?

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**The Tales** – These are the actual stories in Michael Brooks' *Night Time Tales of Terror* anthology. That the book is later ascribed to yours truly makes one wonder who really sold their soul to see their work in print. These shorter pieces began as what I called *Flash Fictions* on my blog. For a while I was adding a new one every Friday, partly as a gimmick to get people to come back on a weekly basis, but also as a fun little exercise in creative writing. I eventually stopped working on them in order to spend more time crafting the stories that make up the book proper. They were fun while they lasted and I'm glad that these ones, my personal favorites, not only have a new home but are, to some degree or other, linked thematically to the tales they follow. The original drafts of these Tales, plus a number of others, can all be found on my blog at [umbrellaproductions.blogspot.com](http://umbrellaproductions.blogspot.com)

**The Wretched Ones** – I wanted to start the collection with a straightforward, old-fashioned horror story. When I was conceiving these tales, I knew from the start that I wanted to have bona fide monsters that were real to the slimy touch, not focus on psychological heebie-jeebies and blah, blah, blah (*The Ghoul Mortician* being the positive exception to the rule). Small, devilish creatures have been a staple in the genre from myths and legends to *Gulliver's Travels* to *Critters* and are, in my humble opinion, a fantastic way to kick off the proceedings (it also ties in nicely to the fact that the Foster family is watching *Gremlins* in the Prologue). The piece is dedicated to Richard Matheson, in particular his short story *Prey*, not only because I love his work (especially the films he scripted for Roger Corman starring the indomitable Vincent Price), but also because Stephen King has said he was a great influence on him. And since King was a great influence on me (this story really bringing to mind the Drew Barrymore segment from the film *Cat's Eye*), I suppose you could say there would be no Mike Morrison without those two gentlemen (although I'm pretty sure my parents might have had something to do with it too).

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**The Thing in the Hospital Hall** – This story existed as a title only for more years than I'd like to think. It just sounds cool to me. It wasn't until my lung collapsed (on two separate occasions, thank you very much) and I had the oh-so pleasant opportunity to spend a decent amount of time in the hospital, that the story really started to take shape. Being laid up in bed, immobilized by the post-operative pump keeping me plugged into the nearby wall socket, gave my mind a lot of free time to wander. And my mind, like Gordon's, is preoccupied with all things horror. It should come as no surprise that we both could start seeing and hearing creatures roaming through the silent halls at night. In this case, I really liked the idea of turning the mad scientist convention on its head by not having the Doctor be the creator of the monster, but instead it's babysitter. The piece is dedicated to Lovecraft because no one does extra-dimensional monsters better than him. In the end, though, I think my tale is more akin to the campy Stuart Gordon movies starring Jeffrey Combs that are loosely based on Lovecraft's work more than on the work itself. And even though it may seem as if the monster is nothing more than the result of Gordon's overactive imagination, rest assured, the thing in the hospital hall is very, very real. Which hospital it now freely roams is unknown to me, so be sure to keep an eye open the next time you're in the unfortunate position to do so.

**The Third Floor** – I have been writing (or at least saying I am a 'writer') for years now, but it wasn't until I started working a number of general labor contracts that I really decided to go for it, primarily to avoid having to continue such laborious, mind-numbingly boring tasks for such minimal pay. I came up with a number of the stories that make up this book while cleaning after a construction crew revamping a wing of a local hospital (the one I was actually admitted to after my lung collapsed for the second time). It was one of the most boring gigs I ever had, but it gave my mind a lot of free time to play. With *The Third Floor* I really wanted to write a story about a person wishing for a better life (which is what I was doing everyday, broom in hand)

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without resorting to the overused plot device of backfiring wishes. Almost every story about a genie in a bottle or a severed monkey's appendage has gone down that path and I wanted to do something new. The entire book could be dedicated to Stephen King, as he is the greatest influence on my writing, but I chose this story in particular because it was my attempt to turn the ordinary into the fantastic, the everyday into the uncanny, and the machine into the malevolent. My elevator might not be *Christine* or *The Mangler*, but that's where the inspiration for it came from.

**The Ghoul Mortician** – For those who know me, they know that my own food phobias are maybe as bad as Martin's are. Or were. I suppose in the end he got over any particular hang-ups he may have had at the onset of the story. I have a personal connection with all of the tales in the book, but this one in particular is definitely the closest I've come to using the craft as a form of catharsis. I'm not sure how I'd react if placed in the same dire situation, but for the sake of the story, cannibalism was the only way to go. Watching someone starve to death is horrific, not horror. The piece is dedicated to Jack Ketchum because, in a roundabout kind of way, it definitely draws from two of his works, the gruesome *Off Season* and the downright terrifying *The Girl Next Door*. He is an author who doesn't pull any of his punches. I tried very hard to follow that lead, not only with *The Ghoul Mortician*, but the rest of the stories in the book as well, stories that progressively got harder and darker, to the point where some of them actually became difficult to write. When that happened, I knew I was on the right track, no matter how disturbing it was. It meant I was being honest. I have Jack Ketchum to thank (or blame) for that.

**Slice N' Dice Part VI** – Growing up as I did in the 80s, it's no surprise that a number of the stories in the book take place during that decade of overindulgence (either naturally or, in the case of *The Open Door*, unnaturally). In a day and age where *Saw* sequels and watered down remakes rule the Cineplex, this is my attempt to recapture the fun

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of the slasher flick from days past, when teens were happy and horny before being decapitated. Now they're just misogynistic, foulmouthed *pretty* douche bags (One recent exception being Adam Green's fantastic film *Hatchet*). The genesis for the piece came after watching *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers*. In that film, the Shape kills the heroine's mom with an axe, her blood splattering the clean white linen she had just hung up in the backyard. When the abusive and destined-to-get-his father returns home from work later that night, said laundry is no longer hanging on the clothesline in the backyard. He discovers it in the washing machine in the basement moments before being dispatched. The *running* washing machine. The idea that in between scenes Michael Myers did the laundry was just too funny to me. In fact, most of the formulaic horror films of that period were already borderline comedies. If these scenes were actually shown, they'd have been more slapstick than slasher (can you picture Jason Voorhees climbing a tree to deposit a body in the branches to be discovered later in the final reel?) After completing *Slive* I discovered the quirky and fantastic film *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* and highly recommend it to anyone who enjoyed my hitherto unseen exploits of the Labor Day Lunatic. The dedications for this one should be obvious, but the 'Part VI' isn't in reference to the Halloween flick that started the ball rolling, but the awful Bill Cosby comedy *Leonard Part 6*. As a kid who was totally into the movies, I had the hardest time trying to figure out why I had never heard of parts 1 through 5.

**Subway Prophet** – Speaking of the 80s.... This story started after hearing a specific line in a Simon and Garfunkle song (*The Sound of Silence* if you want to figure out what it is... copyright costs prohibit me from typing it here) coupled with my wanting to do a piece about collectivist behavior. In this case collecting comics, a crime of which I am also guilty of committing. Although the latter never really materializes in the story, I'm glad things turned out the way they did. I have had to defend my love of all things ghoulish most of my life, and I like the idea



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that Jamie makes use of his love and knowledge of the genre to stop the spread of evil rather than becoming a juvenile delinquent well on his way to psychopathic adulthood (take that, Frederick Wertham). I'm sick of real life violence being attributed to movies or video games or music. Since you're reading this, I've obviously been able to do something constructive rather than destructive after living a life immersed in the stuff. I never went loony-toons, nor do most people who share my love of the genre. You included, I hope (please don't come to any of my signings if this isn't the case). The story is dedicated to the three people most responsible for introducing me to the savage barbarian, Robert E. Howard for creating him in the first place, Roy Thomas for his amazing stories in the black and white Marvel comic, and of course, Mr. Schwarzenegger, Conan incarnate. And to clear up any confusion, my parents were in no way like Jamie's when I was growing up. As much as they may not have liked what I was into, they never forbade me from it (within reason, of course). They provided a haven for my imagination to run free and my creativity to flourish. And for that, I am and will continue to be forever grateful.

**The Deal with Pets** – This is the only story in the entire book that came about after I had already started writing *The Wretched Ones* and wasn't a part of the original outline. It's again another story that has its roots firmly planted in a real life event. I was cleaning the cat litter pan in the basement when I noticed a giant spider on the wall. Not abnormally giant, mind you, and definitely not one that talked to me, but a big fucking spider nonetheless. I couldn't help but wonder if it was one of the little ones I had refused to toss outside into the cold the previous winter, depositing it downstairs instead. It was an act of mercy I had performed so often it left me wondering how many oversized arachnids might be lurking throughout my house. I thought the idea of a war between insects (and a couple of Wretched Ones thrown in for good measure) occurring as the backdrop to an unhappy, unhealthy relationship based solely on usury was a fun one. I decided

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to dedicate the story to William M. Gaines and Al Feldstein because it, more than any other piece in the collection, was really influenced by the old EC comics from the 1950s, especially when it came to the last-minute double cross and shocking denouement. I also enjoyed having the female come out on top for once, as they were usually the victims of their own feminine wiles back in the day. Now if only ‘Ghastly’ Graham Ingels was around to illustrate this one I’d die a happy man.

**The Innocent Janitor** – I’m not sure why, but the final 3 tales in the book are all the oldest, albeit thoroughly rewritten and reworked. Perhaps these stories resonated with me for some reason or other and just had to be told. Or maybe it’s some other pretentious, artistic writerly bullshit. In any case, this story is about 15 years old and was originally and uninspired-ly entitled ‘The Hitchhiker’. The story of an innocent man being punished in a nightmarish lighthouse for the crimes committed by the spirit residing in him remains relatively intact. I simply expanded upon it. The most noticeable changes between this version and that much earlier draft is how I’ve humanized the main character, Frank, and delved into the heinous crimes committed by William Matheson. In terms of the latter, they were some of the hardest pages I’ve ever had to write. I have a young daughter, and those images weren’t easy to commit to paper. But as I said earlier, I need to keep this thing honest. Dead kids should be difficult, not easily digested and then forgotten about. Hopefully the contrast between Billy’s crimes against them and Frank’s love for them highlight the whole duality angle I was hoping to achieve. The trial set piece is much more intricate now than in the original as well. Fleshing out that macabre world of justice, even if said flesh is slimy, scaly and covered with horns, definitely pays off in *The Open Door*. Although all of the tales in the book are connected, this is the one where it is the most noticeable. If after finishing *Door* AND the Epilogue you’re still unsure as to the outcome of everything, another clue that could easily have been passed over upon a first read can be found here.

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And yes, I'm aware of the time paradox of Kate having her baby at this point in the book even though it isn't until the end (and therefore the beginning) that things change. I just felt she was deserving of her own happy ending. The tale is dedicated to Clive Barker for a number of reasons, most notably his willingness to deal with the taboo and for his creation of Pinhead. I'm talking about the Pinhead of *The Hellbound Heart* and the first 2 movies, not any of the inferior sequels that turned the character into a Kruegeresque monster, castrated of all his previous power. The Queen in *Janitor* is my own attempt at creating that same kind of elegant and sophisticated, sexy yet dangerous caretaker of otherworldly order and justice. Minus all of the nails in the face, of course.

**The Benefits of Smoking** – During my years at University, I abandoned writing prose fiction in favor of screenplays and this piece, originally called 'The Murders on Hawthorne Street', was my first foray back after a four year hiatus (the screenplays, all unproduced, live on as icons on my laptop desktop, their titles now making up Michael Brooks' oeuvre that Kate discovers in the bookstore at the beginning of *The Open Door*). With 'Murders' I just sat down and began writing with no idea as to how the story was going to unfold. The end result was a total mess, but I liked the idea and transferred that over to *Benefits* mostly intact. I always wanted the tale to be in the book as I intended it to tie in with the *Prologue* (in much the same fashion as has been done here). Michael Brooks, still an aspiring writer, was to be the main character. But that was never enough to get me interested in revisiting the piece, so I jettisoned the idea time and time again. Then I landed on the idea of attacking the material from the point of view of a man who really doesn't want to quit smoking, but lives in a society where the act is seen by many as on par with serious drug abuse (even though the story is smack dab between one that focus on child molestation and murder and another that has some serious depictions of spousal abuse and racism, I'm willing to bet money there will still be some people out there who take the most

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umbrage with a piece that sings the virtues, or benefits, if you will, of smoking). I liked the irony of the fact that products like nicotine gum or the patch are much more hazardous to your health than the little white sticks they are meant to wean you off of. By the time I started I already knew Michael Brooks was going to serve a more sinister role in *The Open Door*, so I recast him with Benjamin Tramer. In the beginnings of both ‘Murders’ and *Benefits*, I was trying to emulate the opening of *Halloween II* (the Carpenter produced original, not the Rob Zombie version), when news of Mikey’s killing spree breaks and interrupts the local horror movie marathon on TV. If you know your Haddonfield geography or other Carpenter films, you will know that renaming the main character is only the most obvious of my homage’s. The tale as a whole is dedicated to Jack Finney, because at some point or other every author in the genre, in same fashion or other, writes their own take on the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I suppose this one’s mine. Best to get it out of the way now, then.

**The Open Door** – The final tale in the book is also the oldest. It is also the most important. It is the hub which every other one revolves around. It is dedicated to no one in particular because it owes a great deal of debt to all those previously mentioned, and a number of others whose works I read or watched while cobbling this book as a whole together (Peter Straub, Dean Koontz, Ramsey Campbell, F. Paul Wilson, Brian Keene, Joe Hill, John Saul, Robert R. McCammon, Jonathan Maberry, Karloff, Lugosi, Price, Billy Van, the classic Universal Monsters, Val Lewton, Hammer films and William Castle to name but just a few). It’s the longest piece in the book and was the last to finally come together. Originally written on the east coast at a variety of coffee shops while I was still in high school, the story was called ‘Homecoming’ (or ‘Reunion’, I never settled on a favorite), ran only 15 pages in length and was all plot. I enjoyed the idea, but an idea was all it was. During the near three years it took me to complete this collection, I kept adding and subtracting ideas to the piece, trying to make it work. Since the

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opening of the door is what unleashes all of the evil and monsters throughout the book, stitching it together, there was no way *Door* couldn't make it in here somehow. But what it was (no more than half a page of scribbled notes) wouldn't cut it. It had no heart. Eventually the knowledge of how to fix it came to me in bed while I was drifting off to sleep. It forced me, as always, from the comforts of the bedroom to my writing room under the basement stairs to jot down more notes. Notes that I'd have a hard time deciphering the next morning, written in my usual chicken scratch scrawl (editing is always a bitch) coupled with being half asleep at the time they were made. I already knew the roles that Michael Brooks and Porter Johnson would be playing, but I didn't have a strong lead. When I realized the lead should be the antithesis of strong, the final pieces of the puzzle started to come together. I opened the collection with a female (the spunky Lindsey Wallace... there's more Carpenter and Hill for ya) and felt that it should be closed with one as well (even though *The Open Door* takes place chronologically before all those that come before it). The character of Kate needed to be meek and weak in the beginning. You needed to feel that, come the end of things (or the beginning) she could go either way. Will she go along with the others or finally take a stand? When I imagined her staring at the specter of her past, abused self, I knew I finally had something. I knew the story had substance and meaning and was much more than just plot. *The Open Door* isn't a soapbox, and I'm not standing upon it preaching about things that, as a man, I can never truly understand the horrors of. When it comes to domestic violence, the victim (in most cases the woman) is always the victim, even if she chooses not to leave for whatever reason. I am in no way saying that by sticking around, the blame for the evil that is done to them rests on their shoulders, but until they stand up for themselves, that evil will just continue. Bastards like Tom Patterson aren't likely to mellow out on their own. I consciously left the ending to this story open (like the door itself), even though hints are scattered throughout the book as to how I perceive it ended. I did this for no other reason than that

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the decision for how it should end was Kate's, not mine.  
As it always was.

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## **About the Author**

Mike Morrison was born in Quebec, Canada and grew up on the East Coast. He attended Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, receiving an honors degree in English and Film Studies. He currently resides in Orleans, Ontario with his two children, daughter Alex and son Jack. *The Open Door and Other Night Time Tales of Terror* is his first book. He is currently at work on his next project, *Monstertown*. More information can be found on his website at [umbrellaproductions.blogspot.com](http://umbrellaproductions.blogspot.com) and you can follow him at [twitter.com/MikeMAuthor](https://twitter.com/MikeMAuthor).